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What it Means to be a Woman at Midlife:  
First-Time Marathoners and Embodied Learning

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of midlife women training for their first marathon. Six women shared their experiences of physically and mentally challenging themselves to train for a marathon. Phenomenology served as the methodology of the study. The framework is guided by interpretive and holistic learning philosophies. Three major themes emerged: the capable self, connectivity, and purpose. In addition, answers to the two research questions are presented. The first question addresses what the women in the study learned about themselves, others in their lives and the world around them. The second question addresses what we can learn about midlife by listening to the meaning that the women gave to their experience. The findings add to the growing body of positive literature, and the mainstream definitions, about aging, endurance exercise at midlife and embodied learning.

Keywords: midlife women, marathon training, embodied learning

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Tears rolled freely and uncontrollably down her cheeks. The woman stood on a hill on an island surrounded by the Pacific Ocean waters. A new place for her, a new time for her. She did not know what brought on the tears, or whether they were tears of joy, sadness or fear. The woman did not know who she was, or where she was going. She knew that things had changed; things had drastically changed in the blink of an eye. This was her epiphany.

That moment on the hill, almost seven years ago, marked the beginning of the journey leading to this research. It was a moment in my life, my midlife life, which led to a series of events culminating in my curiosity about the experience of midlife for women, and the desire to pursue qualitative research.

My study concentrates on one group in Canada, midlife women, specifically those training for their first marathon. In this chapter I discuss the framework, the focus of the research, and the rationale for investigating this experience. Key concepts are defined and the research questions are presented. My background as it relates to this study is clearly detailed and, finally, limitations of the study close this chapter.

### **Study Focus and Rationale**

The focus of my study is to understand six women's experience of training for their first marathon at midlife. The embodied experience of these women training for a marathon will facilitate further understanding of what we know about the phase of midlife for women. Embodied learning (discussed in detail below) is part of a holistic view of knowledge that involves the body, mind, and all of the senses, as well as a



connection to the environment. Training for long distance running challenges the body and the mind and is an example of embodied learning. Midlife is a time when adults can become more in tune with their mind/body connection making this stage in life an ideal age to research learning from an embodied experience.

Some of the images and interpretations of midlife women as noted in the scientific literature, public scholarship, and from western society media that values youth, suggest that midlife is a period in life filled with turbulent change in self-identity and status within family, friends and work relations, combined with increasing health risks and preoccupation with mortality. Women are told that physically their bodies begin to slow down, they become asexual and less attractive, they lose their sharp edge intellectually and if children are involved, the empty nest syndrome is experienced (Shellenbarger, 2005). The negative physical, medical, social and emotional attributes of midlife, which often become synonymous with menopause in the literature about women, have been studied and reported again and again (Banister, 1997; Burghardt, 1999; Chambers, 2000; Elavsky, 2006; Hafiz, Liu, & Eden, 2007; Jeng, Yang, Chang, Tsao, 2004; Owens et al., 1992; Stocker, 2009; Tom, 2007).

Midlife for women can also be a time of personal growth and transformation. Midlife has been described as a time of inner awareness and development and psychological awakening when women experience satisfaction, wellness and feeling younger than one's chronological age (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). Women can experience positive aspects of midlife through competency, increased freedom and confidence in their own abilities and opinions (Hvas, 2005).

The intent of this research is not to focus on any particular element of midlife, positive or negative, but rather to listen to the participants' descriptions of their experience. My study will add to a growing body of qualitative research that seeks to better understand the midlife experience as described by midlife women. The experiences of the women in my study add to our understanding of what and how midlife women learn about themselves and others, and their world around them, as well as to our understanding of the midlife experience in general.

### **Framework and Key Concepts**

The framework underlying my study is guided by the interpretive set of beliefs that the way of knowing is through the understanding of a situation (Willis, 2007) and that adults learn in a multidimensional or holistic way (Mackeracher, 2006). Below are discussions of interpretivism and holistic learning followed by a discussion of the key concepts in my study, midlife and the body.

#### **Interpretivism**

For interpretivists, what the world means to the participants in a study is of utmost importance to good research (Willis, 2007). This approach to research contrasts with the positivist approach that aims to find universal truths about the world. The purpose of interpretive research in general is to build an understanding of a situation or context. I agree with Creswell's (2007) statement that the goal of interpretivist research is to rely on the participant's representations of an experience while seeking understanding of her world. In my study the purpose is to understand the meaning women give to their experience of training for their first marathon at midlife. It is my intention to add to the

literature on midlife women from a woman's voice with the purpose of contributing to the breadth and accuracy of the midlife experience of women.

### **Holistic Learning**

Holistic learning is an engagement of all aspects of the learner. It is based on the philosophy of holism, in which the parts are inseparable from the whole. It incorporates the body, the spirit and soul in learning, emotions in learning, the mind in learning, the environment in learning, and relationships in learning (Mackeracher, 2004). Unlike dualist thinkers, I believe that growth and transformation occur when the whole person, mind, body and spirit is incorporated. Embodied learning is the most important of these concepts to my study and is discussed in detail below.

**Embodied learning.** Embodied learning, somatic learning, and physical learning are terms used interchangeably in the literature (Kerka, 2002). I use embodied learning as the term of choice for the purpose of this thesis as it generally refers to a broad view of knowledge construction with the body as the site of learning where thoughts are influenced by our bodies and vice versa. Embodied learning recognizes bodily experiences as a source of knowledge, through movement, the senses, emotions, and connection to the environment (Freiler, 2008). Growth and transformation occur when the whole person, mind, body and spirit is incorporated, according to Freiler. Clark (2005) argues against the western adaptation of the privileging of the mind over the body, and maintains that the body is a prominent site and that it is a source of knowledge and learning. Embodied learning is a way of recognizing that we know with our bodies as well as with our minds.

Clark (2005) maintains that knowledge begins in the body, that learning is led by our bodies. For example, it is common, perhaps universal, to experience a churning stomach or hair standing on end before we mindfully understand what is troubling or exciting us. In these instances the body is the site of learning that triggers the cognition of an experience. This might seem outrageous to dualist thinkers however one has to think about the implications of our biological make-up. In a three-week embryo there are three sheets of cells present. One of these sheets, the ectoderm, gradually gives rise to the skin, brain and nervous system. From the same group of cells we develop structures that allow us to feel physical sensations, experience emotions and mentally process information (Knaster, 1996).

A number of factors identified by Clark (2001, 2005) have contributed to the growing recognition that the body is a source of knowledge. First, the women's movement and feminist theorists opened up the study of the body from a site of shame and oppression to a legitimate origin of knowledge. Second, most people can describe instances of stress or excitement where their bodies identified and exhibited the stress or excitement, through increased heart rate, anxiety, shivers, anger or nervousness, before their minds understood what the issue was. The stress can even manifest itself in illness and disease. Third, there is ample evidence that adequate sleep and exercise and a healthy diet affect memory and other brain functions and thus learning. And fourth, many have experienced the body as a site of learning when responding to intuition, or gut feelings, as it is commonly referred to.

There are many instances when relying on intuition has diverted catastrophes or led to amazing outcomes. There is a documented study of a professional race car driver

who slowed down at a corner where he would not normally slow down during a race. This action prevented him from crashing into an accident scene around the corner. The lead researcher who studied this incident noted,

The driver couldn't explain why he felt he should stop, but the urge was much stronger than his desire to win the race. The driver underwent forensic analysis by psychologists afterwards, where he was shown a video to mentally relive the event. In hindsight he realized that the crowd, which would have normally been cheering him on, wasn't looking at him coming up to the bend but was looking the other way in a static, frozen way. That was the cue. He didn't consciously process this, but he knew something was wrong and stopped in time (PsyArticles.com, 2008, para. 5).

Another example of embodied learning, of the interrelatedness of physical sensations, awareness of the sensations, and processing information can be found in the story of a group of sea villagers on the coast of Thailand at the site of the 2004 tsunami who experienced a high rate of survival. The high survival rate has been attributed to the villagers' interrelatedness with their environment (Freiler, 2008). This connection with the environment combined with a mind and body awareness of and reaction/action in response to the warnings is an example of embodied learning. Because the survival rate among the general human population involved in the tsunami was much lower than the sea villagers, one has to wonder whether humans, in general, have lost touch with and become unaware of the learning that takes place through the body, according to Freiler. This example of embodied learning in the sea villagers illustrates how being attentive to the body is a way of knowing. It seems our body has become, to many, something to

think about only when faced with hunger, illness, pain, or a need to change in order to conform to western society expectations of physical appearance. There is an expression of dismissal by many of the role that the body plays in learning.

### **The Body**

The body is an entity that has been shaped anatomically, biologically, experientially and culturally (Davis, 2007). Although an in-depth understanding of the body and how it works and theories about what the body is, is beyond the scope of my discussion here, it is important to include a discussion of the female human body as it relates to my study. My study did not emerge from a feminist or a poststructural perspective; however, much of the literature on the woman's body has been written from these frameworks (Somerville, 2004) and they offer some helpful, relevant insights.

From a feminist poststructural framework the woman's body has been medicalized and defined by patriarchy. It is widely theorized that the normal body has masculine attributes of being a means to an end, akin to a machine, and is inferior to the mind (Moore, 2010). In her tracing of perceptions of the female body through western history, Lennon (2010) notes that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, women's bodies were treated as commodities to be managed by women themselves so that they could attain material success through the convention of marriage. The body gained political prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism in Britain through efforts against the Contagious Disease Act. This act highlighted the double standard between men and women by allowing women to be subjected to compulsory inspection and subsequent confinement in a hospital until cured if they were found to have venereal disease. The effort against the act was the beginning of other subsequent campaigns and acts aimed at helping women

gain control of their own bodies. More recently, the female body has been defined in stages as a passive object and a source of shame (Lennon, 2010). Conversely, adds Lennon, it has been applauded and valued by 1970s sexual difference theorists because of the capacity to give birth.

Some feminist theorists would argue against the experiencing, biological, lived-in body and argue that the female body is what culture decides it is, a discursive regime and a locale for reflecting power in a culture (Davis, 2007; Somerville, 2004). Somerville identifies two distinct categories about the body that articles written in *Feminist theory and the body* fall into. The first category contains articles that theorize a discursive body, and the second category contains articles that address questions about the lived body. The majority of the articles fall under the first category. Somerville identifies phenomenology as a methodology for further research to address the lack of attention paid to the lived body. Somerville suggests that just as language is always present in culture, the body is also always present, and that “the body can intervene in discourse just as discourse can intervene into the body” (Somerville, 2004, p. 51).

Foucault views the body as an entity that is “socially contingent” (Moore, 2010, p. 102). According to Foucault, what is communicated about something can become reality, and that discourse is socially construed rather than a truth (Ritenburg, 2010). Within this view, the healthy body is one that medical professionals, educators, politicians and others in power within a society deem to be healthy. Therefore, midlife women are told that the healthy, desirable body is one that has reproductive capacity. Beyond images of the normal, healthy female body as pre-menopausal, the normal body in mainstream discourse is one that does not cause pain or discomfort internally; nor does it draw

attention, by deviating from that which is socially assigned as acceptable (Dolezal, 2010). Foucault theorizes that perceived acceptable or normal behaviour is developed in and is a product of a particular social context rather than a physical reality (Dolezal, 2010).

Foucault's attention to power relations and the body takes this further in that women actually discipline their own bodies not only to avoid social punishments but also to derive certain kinds of pleasure (Lennon, 2010). I will return to this point in Chapter 4: Findings.

Clarke (2010) reports conflicting research about whether or not aging women's priorities regarding their bodies change when faced with loss of functional abilities and the emergence of health concern. As I have outlined already, women's bodies have been objectified, and in western societies, bodies that are young, healthy, thin, fit, capable of reproduction and attractive are valued. As women age and their bodies change, they may lose their identity and self worth. In this anti-aging culture, midlife women are faced with the struggle to redefine themselves or they may feel pressured to resist aging by pursuing the socially desired youthful body (Clarke, 2010). Within western culture women especially are encouraged to discipline their bodies through exercise, dieting and subscription to an endless array of procedures and products that preserve and promote youthfulness, according to Clarke.

### **Midlife**

Midlife is the time of human life between youth and old age and is usually considered as the years between 40 and 60. Midlife has different meanings both chronologically and conceptually for different people. Ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious orientation, marital status and employment status can all affect how women



individually define when midlife occurs (Lippert, 1997). Interaction of these factors also adds to the complexity of defining midlife. Chronological and conceptual definitions of midlife are outlined below and because of the focus of my study, particular mention relates to women. A very brief summary of the midlife stage in theories of adult development is included below. The term midlife crisis is discussed because of the real or perceived association between the midlife stage in life and feelings of crisis.

The midlife phase has been difficult to define chronologically and has varied between 40 years at the young end and 65 years at the upper end (Willment, 2008). According to the 2006 Canadian Census, the baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1965, make up the largest population group in Canada and women continue to make up the majority of the senior population (Statistics Canada, 2007). For the purpose of my study midlife is defined as 40 to 65 years of age. There are just over six million Canadian women within this age bracket, representing approximately 18% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Conceptually, midlife is evolving, varied and complex. There are demographic and historical explanations for the appearance of the midlife stage. Midlife is a relatively recently recognized stage of life. During most of human history only one in 10 people could expect to live to 65 years of age (Sheehy, 1995). Declining infant mortality, fallen birth rate, elimination of major killer epidemics, medical advances, increased life expectancy and changes in work and family life and economies have all contributed to this stage in life called midlife.

Before the middle of the 20th century, human psychological growth and development was considered complete by young adulthood with life after 40 or 50 years

regarded as time for retirement and decline (Shellenbarger, 2005). Erikson and Erikson's (1981) theory of progressive stages from infancy to old age promoted a change in thought concerning midlife with a focus in this stage on generativity, the concern for future generations. Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs progresses through life stages with the pinnacle being self-actualization and self-transcendence and wisdom that come with meeting these needs and being true to oneself. Jung (1971) declared that people in midlife stop the roles they were playing and experience new life courses, and Mezirow and Associates (1990) stated that midlife is the time for reassessing our past, which leads to personal change and transformation. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee's (1976) study of 40 men between 35 to 45 years of age in the late 1960s delved into relatively new territory of midlife experience and they suggested that midlife is a time of transition and for reflecting and doing. In the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Sheehy (1995) explored women's roles and responsibilities in midlife and characterized midlife as a time of psychological and social growth.

Through the realms of science and medicine, midlife for women came to be synonymous with menopause and the physical and psychological symptoms associated with it. Representations of menopause in the media and in mainstream discourse are characterized by images of illness, decay, hot flashes, insomnia, depression, loss of libido and poor memory (Perz & Ussher, 2008). These have become part of the definition of midlife, specifically midlife crisis.

The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) definition of midlife is defined simply as "middle age." What is noteworthy is that the term midlife is immediately followed by the term midlife crisis. The term midlife crisis is defined as "a period of

emotional turmoil in middle age caused by the realization that one is no longer young and characterized especially by a strong desire for change” (¶ 1). This parallel between the midlife phase and crisis is found in the scientific literature, popular culture, and even in the dictionary!

The coining of the term midlife crisis in the 1960s made the start of midlife and crisis synonymous. The term referred to men until the last 20 years or so when women began being included in academic work as research participants. This is characteristic of much of the research done prior to this time and assumptions were made that women had similar patterns of midlife experiences as men (Willment, 2008). Midlife crisis is still seen in the scientific literature and in our culture as a descriptor of midlife.

As an example of this connection of crisis and midlife, author Shellenbarger (2005) chose to title her book about the midlife transition *The Breaking Point: How Today's Women are Navigating Midlife Crisis*. Shellenbarger defines six archetypes that midlife women fall into as a way of striving to find what has been missing and to become whole. Although it is difficult to argue that midlife women do not find themselves in a time when goals and values change, Shellenbarger's emphasis of midlife as crisis is hard to miss. Throughout eight pages of introduction the word crisis appears more than 20 times and other negative associations such as loss and despair are strewn throughout the book. Although Shellenbarger notes that midlife women can consciously move forward and embrace the change or that women can repress and deny the chaos, the negative tone of the book is indicative of much of the literature and popular western culture relating to women's midlife experience.

Because of associations like the one Shellenbarger (2005) makes, midlife crisis continues to be a recognizable western midlife phenomenon and descriptor of the middle years. This is an example of literature that defines midlife as a predominantly negative experience even though research has shown that it is a time in life that can be characterized by growth and well-being and not just as a time of physical and mental decline. As noted earlier in this chapter, the intent of my study is not to define midlife as crisis or to apply any specific definition but rather to interpret the meaning the women give to their experience. Contrary to Shellenbarger's description of midlife, analysis of the women's experience in my study does not support midlife in general, or training for a marathon at midlife, as predominantly a time of crisis.

### **Research Questions**

The specific research questions investigated in this study are:

1. What and how do women learn holistically about themselves, others, and the world around them through the experience of training for a first marathon at midlife?
2. What can we learn about the meaning of midlife by listening to women's descriptions of their experiences?

### **Researcher Background**

Qualitative interpretive research warrants full explanation of researcher background in relation to the study phenomenon. I am a midlife woman. I trained for and ran my first marathon at 49 years of age. I kept a written journal while training. My challenge of training for and completing a marathon was shared with family, friends and work colleagues. More accurately, those in my life were subjected to be a part of the

experience in one capacity or another. Throughout the research process for my study I participated in additional long distance running events. I also experienced periods of time without running due to medical or injury related circumstances.

My recent experience of running a first marathon at 49 years of age was different than the predominant literature and mainstream discourse pertaining to the midlife experience for women. As discussed in detail in Chapter 2: Literature Review, overall the scientific research has focused on the negative aspects of midlife, negative portrayals of menopause, health risks, loss, and physical decline. While training for my first marathon I found that my body was stronger than at any other time in my life. Preparing for and following through a training schedule required new knowledge that challenged me to learn and strengthened my appreciation for lifelong learning. I experienced learning through personal growth; as well, I learned about others and the world around me. I didn't feel loss for spending more time on myself and having less time with my children. I became very aware of what my body could and could not do and combined with increased endorphins released during physical activity, a greater capacity and focus for cognitive learning was experienced.

I experienced an overall feeling of well-being unparalleled by any other time in my life. I wondered if others shared a similar positive midlife experience, an experience that does not focus on negative portrayals of menopause, physical decline, heart disease, and mortality but rather focuses on growth, learning, health, opportunity and new challenges. Curiosity about this time in my life and the long distance running experience sparked the interest in pursuing this research.

It is noteworthy that during my recent nine-month period with little or no running due to injury I experienced some of the symptoms that are noted in research and are identified in the mainstream culture as indicative of the midlife phase. As examples, I felt more tired, sad, anxious and unmotivated, and I experienced trouble concentrating and focusing. These contributed to a decrease in my self-confidence. I lost physical strength and stamina. During that time I was not able to participate in running events that I had signed up for nor could I set any short-term or long-term goals for long distance running events because of uncertainty about my injury recovery. The most prominent changes that I experienced during this time were lack of energy, motivation and focus, and sleeplessness. These factors all contributed to an overall feeling of anxiety and sadness.

As per phenomenology protocol I made a sincere attempt to set aside my experience in an attempt to present the data with fresh eyes. Phenomenology is the approach used in my study and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods. The analysis presented in my study is my interpretation of the meaning that the participants gave to their experiences. I acknowledge that sharing a similar experience and being a midlife woman negates the possibility of complete separation and objectivity; however, the analysis is based solely on the written and spoken communication from the six women in my study.

An unplanned but effective media release presented my research to the general public prior to participant recruitment completion through the University of Calgary website and local television and radio news, and provided the unintentional opportunity for women to connect with me. Participants made a connection with me because I am a midlife woman who had set and met long distance running goals, the same goals that they

had set. I did maintain a balance in the relationship with the women. I provided relevant training information and support without interfering with the women in a way that my researcher position intentionally affected their experiences.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The number of participants (six) and locality of participants are recognized limitations. As with the majority of research on midlife women, my study has investigated women who are white, educated, married to men and have children (Hafiz et al., 2007; Lippert, 1997). A focus is necessary in order to limit the research to what is manageable, that what can be studied in the depth aimed for by qualitative investigation (O'Toole, 2010). Despite a relatively narrow participant profile, the amount of text collected from the six women in my study is substantial for one researcher to analyze with a limited timeframe. My findings can be added to findings from other research to help deepen the understanding of midlife women, marathon training and embodied learning.

The participants agreed to share their experiences, thoughts, reflections, fears and goals in their journal writings and during the interviews. Knowing the journal entries and communication would be analyzed as research data might have restricted or influenced what the women wrote and or said. It is my belief that the women in my study were honest and candid and they generously shared their experience with me. The women indicated an eagerness to contribute to research, and at the same time their commitment to the study became part of their motivation to continue with the training.

Transcendental phenomenology, the approach used in this study, relies on the descriptions of participants' lived experiences, and therefore has a focus on internal

factors. Social factors subsequently fade into the background and this creates another limitation to my study. Transcendental phenomenological research also emphasizes the importance that researchers have an open mind to the phenomenon being studied. This is called bracketing and it is necessary in order to focus on the participants' experiences and their views of the experience. I made every effort to view all of the participants' information with an open mind. Each of their stories was original and unique and, therefore, heard by me for the first time during this study.

My inability to suspend all past experience and knowledge about training for a first marathon at midlife in order to take a completely fresh perspective on the participant experiences, as noted in the Researcher Background section of this chapter, is acknowledged as a possible limitation. This personal immersion did instigate the desire to better understand midlife for women and the argument exists, "Why take the heart out of the situations we are trying to help readers understand?" (Eisner, 1991, p. 37). My heart is in this research because of personally experiencing the phenomenon and my heart is in this research with a sincere effort to report the participants' experiences as they have described them.

### **Remainder of the Thesis**

The literature review is found next in Chapter 2. The chapter begins with a discussion of my examination of the scientific and non-scientific literature as it relates to western midlife women, marathon training and exercise of midlife women, and embodied learning in reference to midlife women, exercise and marathon training. I include a summary of key points from the literature review at the end of the chapter.



In Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods, is a review of the methodology, phenomenological research, methods and participants, what I refer to as who, what, where, when and how, of my study. Ethical considerations and issues related to validity are included. In Chapter 4, I discuss the study findings. First the key themes that emerged are discussed, followed by answers to the specific research questions. Following are what Creswell (2007) refers to as the *textural*, *structural*, and overall or *essential* descriptions. Finally is a summary of the results. I then close with Chapter 5, in which I discuss my conclusions, compare my findings with previous research, and share implications for further research and teaching related to midlife women, marathon training, exercise and well-being, and adult and embodied learning.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Following is a discussion of my exploration of the scientific and non-scientific literature on western midlife women, exercise and marathon training of midlife women, and embodied learning as it relates to midlife women, exercise and long distance running. The objective of the literature review is to briefly identify the focus of the research on these issues, which is predominantly from a quantitative paradigm. While it is important to value a variety of research approaches, and quantitative studies are included in this review, the focus of my review is on studies that have a qualitative approach. Qualitative researchers start from the premise that the personal experiences of each individual are legitimate sources of knowledge (Grant & O'Brien Cousins, 2001). The so-called heart of an experience is missing from quantitative research that relies on empirical method and levels of significance. Additionally, a significant amount of the literature focuses on the negative aspects of midlife. In my study, I avoid focusing on the negative issues associated with midlife, in an effort to illuminate more positive aspects of this period of a woman's life. A summary of key points from the literature review closes the chapter.

### **Midlife Women**

There is a consensus within the literature that midlife is a time of change. Much of the scientific literature on midlife women compiles quantitative data and has a negative emphasis focusing on menopause, health issues and family and career crisis which highlight the biological role of women. These studies provide important quantifiable data about the stage of midlife for women. What is missing from quantitative studies is the meaning that individuals give to their own experience. Additionally, my review finds that

the majority of studies on midlife women have been with women who are Caucasian, middle-class and city dwellers. This was the case with the participants in my study. This could be indicative of midlife women who train for a marathon at midlife; however, further research with women from varied cultural backgrounds would be needed to confirm this. One study, discussed in the following paragraph, did not have Caucasian women as study participants. The results confirm that there are important relationships between cultural factors and menopausal symptoms experienced by midlife women, which affect the overall midlife experience.

Hafiz et al. (2007) conducted a quantitative study with participants who were Indian midlife women living in Sydney, Australia. The researchers made an effort to explore the cultural context of the menopause experience, and to add to the literature and our understanding of midlife that is not based on research with Caucasian, middle-class, urban women. A total of 203 women between 45 to 65 years of age were questioned about their midlife experiences with The Menopause-Specific Quality of Life questionnaire. The women in the study complained more about physical symptoms than the other areas related to psychosocial, sexual and vasomotor issues. Results included reports by 52% of participants about a decrease in physical strength, while 53% noted decrease in stamina and 52% noted feeling a lack of energy. Other results were that 37% felt depressed, 33% felt restless or nervous and 34% reported loss of memory.

Additionally, Hafiz et al. (2007) investigated other variables that may or may not affect the experience of menopause. These included educational level, marital status, employment status, number of years living in Australia and the stage of menopause. The researchers noted that studies have shown that non-Caucasian women are

underrepresented for hormone replacement treatment of menopausal symptoms and the women had a positive attitude toward menopause with fewer symptoms than Caucasian women (Hafiz et al., 2007).

My review of the literature focused on the emerging flow of studies on midlife with findings that are focused less on life crisis and the negatives of menopause and more on personal growth, development, awareness, life satisfaction and opportunity. This is the body of knowledge that my study aims to complement. I am attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the midlife experience for women, and to add a different perspective from that of the synchronicity of midlife, menopause and crisis. Following are studies that relate to my research and that find primarily positive results of the midlife experience.

The results of one study did not support midlife as crisis, but as a time when participants experienced positive growth, discovering peace and finding new meaning (Hargrave, 2007). It was the researcher's intent to explore differences in the women's experiences and to question the notion of midlife defined as a time of crisis. As is the case for my study, Hargrave wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how women experience midlife through an interpretive process of analyzing the women's life stories, which were documented in written journals. Hargrave followed a social constructivist framework in which, like Hafiz et al. (2007), the researchers deemed the context, culture and social relationships of the individuals being studied of key importance to the midlife experience.

In another study, in-depth interviews with 21 midlife Australian women focusing on their midlife transitions found that the women reported their experiences as overall

positive, citing increased confidence, self-awareness and self-worth (Perz & Ussher, 2008). The study supports research that contradicts midlife as predominantly a time of psychological turmoil or physical decline. Although the women in the Perz and Ussher study reported some sadness in terms of physical changes and awareness of mortality, it was not expressed as a serious concern for the women. The key themes that emerged in the Perz and Ussher study identify midlife as a time of growth, increased self-confidence and self-awareness, happiness, hopefulness and empowerment.

Other findings dispute the negative stereotype of the midlife experience for women, and reveal that life satisfaction increases with age. Degges-White and Myers (2006) completed a statistical analysis of a questionnaire answered by over 200 midlife women living in the United States. The participants were 91% Caucasian and 9% African American. The researchers found that the women's subjective or self-perceived age affected their overall wellness. Women who reported their subjective age less than their chronological age, reported greater overall wellness. The findings reflect western cultural messages regarding the need to maintain a youthful image. That comment reiterates the point made about the importance of culture and the images of midlife to the midlife experience, a theme found elsewhere in the empirical and conceptual literature (Hargrave, 2007; Hafiz et al., 2007, Perz & Ussher, 2008, Shellenbarger, 2005).

Another interpretive study of midlife women's experience that analyzed participant narratives highlights how the women define themselves. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 20 European American midlife women. The results indicated that there was an overall feeling of confidence and empowerment experienced by the participants (Paff Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). The authors also noted the cultural

value of being young, or at least appearing young in western society, and they focused on how midlife women experienced their changing bodies and the impact that sociocultural values had on them. The researchers found that the participants came to view the mainstream ideologies, rather than their own bodies, as problematic but that this process was not without some uncertainty and ambivalence.

Paff Ogle and Damhorst (2005) suggested one explanation for determining whether women accept society's definition of midlife or not. They noted that the participants were from a demographic cohort that was part of the 1960s and 1970s women's movement, and that they were influenced by the movement. That was a time when women resisted perceived social injustices related to their bodies, their roles in the workplace, and legal rights. Perhaps because of this it was not surprising that the women in their study resisted cultural ideologies about their bodies and their midlife experience.

Strauss's (2009) research using secondary quantitative analysis, studied women in the baby boomer cohort, and also identified year of birth as a contributing factor to the experience of midlife. The Strauss study included American women of different ethnicities and races. No relationship was found between race and women's attitudes toward menopause. Further research would provide more insight into this interesting mix of midlife ideology and reality.

My search revealed other research on women's changing bodies that did not focus on quantifying symptoms of menopause (Banister, 1999, 2000). For example, from the narratives of 11 women aged 40 to 53 years, obtained through individual and group interviews, Banister (1999) studied how midlife women perceived their changing bodies. The Canadian women in the study were from varied ethnic, racial, educational,

employment, sexual orientation and marital statuses. All of the women identified themselves as experiencing physiological changes associated with midlife. In addition to discussing the 11 women's perceptions, the researcher focused on providing a basis for health care for women based on the participants' descriptions. The study results did not support the prevalent literature that focuses on the ailments and illnesses of the aging body. The women in the study found that what they are led to believe about midlife from mainstream culture and medical doctors is often not what they experienced themselves. Some women in the study did not identify with their aging bodies but rather experienced a sense of inner youth that defied what the mirror and culture told them, and by interpreting their midlife changes for themselves the participants came to terms with some of the changes.

Perhaps because of the negativity, ambiguity and lack of knowledge associated with women in midlife in the mainstream cultural stereotypes, women experience conflict and begin to question the cultural creations and the devaluing of aging (Banister, 2000). What many midlife women are feeling is not necessarily what they are made to believe midlife is. Given what midlife women are told, what they read about, and the way they are treated, it is not surprising that The National Centre on Women and Aging at Brandeis University in Massachusetts found that women aged 50 and over said they feel better about getting older than they thought they would (Gibb, 2005). This is a common experience for the women in my study who referred to hearing about negative midlife experiences from their mothers and from the portrayed sociocultural values, and that they did not experience midlife the way it was and is described.

### **Midlife Women, Marathon Training, and Exercise**

The literature as it relates to midlife women, exercise, and marathon training is somewhat ambiguous and sparse. Qualitative scientific literature on midlife women and exercise, including distance running, is limited. Vertinsky (2002) outlined some explanations for the scarcity, inconsistencies, and negativity in the literature. Her investigation on aging women and physical activity identified the predominance of relevant texts written by men, about men and aging. Materials often emphasize the acceptance over time of appropriate aging behaviour characterized as passivity, gentle exercise and plenty of rest. The scientific and medical fields typically define aging as a time of decline, weakness and invisibility. To summarize, past history, who is doing the research, the research paradigm, and the focus of the research all contribute to our understanding of the midlife experience. These factors have all contributed to western stereotypes and understanding of midlife women and exercise. All of these factors help to explain the meager literature on women who train for their first marathon at midlife.

Examples of these factors affecting the literature on midlife women marathon training, and exercise, are given in the first few paragraphs below. Next, I discuss studies that focus on the benefits experienced through marathon running and exercise. Following is a review of the literature that relates to the low participation rates of midlife women in physical activity.

A recent search of online theses and dissertations in ProQuest with midlife women as the search subject revealed 670 results. A survey of 200 of these studies from the years 2010 to 2012 found 10 studies related to exercise, three of these specific to long distance running. This represents less than 2% of the research. The majority of the studies



on exercise were quantitative with a focus on health-related issues. The predominance of literature as it relates to midlife women and exercise focuses on the means to an end, or more aptly a means to avoid “the end.” One example is a study by Sternfeld et al. (2004) of 3,000 multiethnic women aged 42 to 52 years living in the United States that questioned the impact of the stage of menopause that the women were at and their participation in exercise on changes in weight and fat distribution. The most significant finding in the study from an exercise and public health perspective was that increased physical activity at midlife contributed to weight maintenance, thus supporting the researcher’s desire to help promote and support physical activity in midlife women.

As noted, the extensive quantitative data seen in the literature is collected to describe physical functioning, capabilities, and limitations. These quantitative studies focus on the impact of physical activity on weight changes, health and menopausal symptoms (see, for example, Berger et al., 2007; Jeng et al., 2004). Sattelmair, Kurth, Buring, and Lee (2010) noted that a review of studies found that overall the evidence supported a 25% to 30% reduction in stroke risk with physical activity. The findings of Jeng et al. (2004) supported the premise that menopausal women who exercise regularly were able to face menopause with more optimism.

A random collection of 39 studies, articles, dissertations and theses specifically on midlife women and physical activity found that 60% of the collection had what I considered to be a negative connotation. In over half of the studies there was an implied negative value applied to the experience of midlife, through the focus on the negative aspects of menopause and crisis. This speaks to the medical and scientific definition that

midlife is a time of physical decline, disregarding the lived experiences of many midlife women.

The focus in my study on the learning experiences of midlife women running a first marathon does not imply the need to diminish or negate the relevance and importance of studies that provide quantitative data about the specifics of health-related issues, midlife women and exercise. As noted above, quantitative research provides invaluable information regarding health risks associated with aging. There is, however, acknowledgment in the literature that there is a need for more qualitative research, to add life stories about midlife and exercise to the abundant quantitative findings.

In response to this, a special issue of the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* (JAPA) was devoted to qualitative research on aging and physical activity. The editors recognized that the majority of articles published in general in relation to aging and in the journal since the first publication in 1993, were positioned in the quantitative realm of research, with few studies that examined the meanings of aging from the perspective of the individual (Grant & O'Brien Cousins, 2001).

Although JAPA focuses on adults 65 years of age and older there is a parallel with research on midlife adults in that there is an abundance of research dedicated to quantifying physical activity and performance and characteristics of the aged. The articles that were included in the special issue were varied and included an autoethnography about a woman's experience with her mother's Alzheimer's disease (Milchrist, 2001), an account of physical activity among older Native women (Henderson & Ainsworth, 2001), and an article on the impact of an assigned physical regime rather than the use of medication for 15 women aged 50 to 80 years (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2001). The Milchrist

study suggested the importance of the activity of dance in Alzheimer's disease. Dance essentially became the only way of communicating for an older woman suffering with Alzheimer's. Hardcastle and Taylor's research recognized the importance of awareness and promotion of appropriate, positive physical activity opportunities for women aged 50 to 80 years. In recognition of the lack of physical activity research on minority women, Henderson and Ainsworth explored the involvement and meanings of physical activity from childhood to present with 26 Native American women aged 40 to 80 years. The women reported having more opportunity for exercise when they were younger. The researchers confirmed from the findings that physical activity was not so much a choice but was a reaction to life situations over the course of the women's lives. All of the articles I've highlighted in this paragraph suggest that one's history and social forces contribute to identity and physical activity behaviour in older adults. The importance of referring to the special issue of JAPA is that the authors found that when adults tell their stories about physical activity experiences, one gets a different sense of reality from that in the scientific quantitative literature on aging and exercise. The findings also support the positive implications of exercise for midlife and older adults.

The newness of women to the official marathon world helps explain the lack of qualitative study and published literature on midlife women who train for their first marathon at midlife. It was not until the 1970s that marathons were officially open to women and 1984 was the first year women were allowed to compete in Olympic marathons (Majcen, 2007). The world's oldest annual marathon, the Boston Marathon, did not officially open the race to women until 1972.

## **Benefits of Exercise**

There is ample evidence that exercise is beneficial physically, reducing the risk of heart disease, osteoporosis and diabetes, and psychologically, for healthy aging among both men and women (Berger et al., 2007; Flora, 2003; Sattelmair et al., 2010; Stocker, 2009). In addition, valuable physiological research is done on non-human subjects. A recent study done at McMaster University found that every tissue and organ in the bodies of mice put on a running program exhibited recovery to age-related damage. What is exciting about the study is that, in addition to the expected positive impact exercise had on the muscles and heart of the mice, the researchers found similar positive effects of the exercise on the brain, skin, hair, gonads, kidneys, spleen and liver (Kirkey, 2011).

In a Calgary based study, Stocker (2009) noted the importance of finding ways of encouraging more women to engage in physical activity. Seventeen midlife women enrolled in a 12-week exercise program participated in this study. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Data were collected from questionnaires and two interviews. Study results indicated that women who exercised were more likely to declare a more positive menopausal transition. The majority of the women in the study made the connection between exercise and an increased sense of well-being and overall improved quality of life.

Majcen's (2007) research supports the extensive findings that physical activity and exercise have been shown to benefit health, both physically and psychologically, and that physical activity is an important part of midlife, particularly for women. Using grounded theory approach, the researcher conducted two interviews with 27 midlife women training for their first marathon. The purpose of the study was to look at the

psychosocial impact of a specific training program on women. The results of Majcen's study add to our understanding of the benefits and detriments of exercise to midlife women and provide information that can help promote increased physical activity in midlife women.

Some similarities emerged between the benefits of marathon running of midlife women found in Majcen's (2007) research and what midlife women in my study learn through the experience. Women in both studies experienced increased confidence, energy levels and commitment to goal setting. Through the challenge of doing something they had never done before, the women in both studies learned things about themselves that they did not know before.

The research findings of 400 midlife Caucasian Australian born women also show that physical activity is not only important for physical health but it is just as important for psychological health (Netz, Zach, Taffe, Guthrie, & Dennerstein, 2008). The longitudinal quantitative study showed that the women doing sufficient exercise had a higher perception of their well-being than did women who did not exercise sufficiently. This encouraging result is dampened by the fact that about half of the participants were not sufficiently active in terms of public health recommendations (Netz et al., 2008). Following is a review of the literature relating to the underrepresentation of midlife women who exercise on a regular basis.

### **Gendered and Age-related Trends in and Attitudes about Participation in Physical Activity**

Researchers have set out to describe, through qualitative research, perceived barriers to and facilitators of physical activity for midlife women (Hendry, Solman,

Choate, Autrey & Landry, 2010). A physician interested in increasing physical activity in midlife women prompted the investigation. Twenty women in a Southern U.S. state were interviewed. The majority of the women were Caucasian with college education and all were middle class or above.

The findings by Hendry et al. (2010) provided information to counsellors and other medical professionals about the importance of helping women to recognize their attitudes about exercise. They found that if women were inhibited by thoughts reflected in the mainstream discourse about exercise in midlife, understanding and support could help to change their beliefs and participation in physical activity. It is an interesting note that once women had a different perception about what defines exercise they realized that it was something they could do; this realization resulted in increased participation. For example once walking or gardening were viewed as forms of exercise that contributed to mental and physical benefits, the women in the study viewed themselves as more active because they engaged in these activities and subsequently became more motivated to increase their activity. Additionally, some women viewed menopause as a disease that caused a barrier to exercise while others viewed it as a time of newfound freedom that facilitated exercise.

The consequences of awareness and perception of what midlife women can and cannot do physically was also supported by Swan, Friis and Turner (2008). Their findings were from three years of national survey data collected from over 90,000 American adults aged 46 to 86 years. The researchers reported that the midlife boomers in their study accepted interventions that promoted physical activity. They suggested that

health promotion programs are essential for midlife people's participation in exercise and subsequently in their overall well-being.

Canadian statistics also tell us that midlife women have the lowest exercise participation rate of all age groups, by gender. According to recent Statistics Canada data on population by sex and age group the population of women 40 to 64 years of age is 6,124,000. A 2010 Statistics Canada poll found that 2,298,632 women 45 to 64 years of age reported physical activity during leisure time as moderately active or active (the equivalent of walking 30 to 60 minutes per day, or taking an hour long exercise class three times per week versus those not active). This figure represents 37.5% of the female population aged 45 to 64 years.

An interesting comparison finds that women 20 to 44 years of age who participated in physical activity during leisure time represented 49% of the total population of women in that age range (Statistics Canada, 2010). The participation rate of midlife men aged 45 to 64 years is 38% while men 20 to 44 years of age who reported physical activity during leisure time represented 54% of men in that age range. These numbers indicate that fewer midlife women and men are participating in physical activity than their younger counterparts and the difference is greater for men than women. A possible explanation for the highest participation rate being in men 20 to 44 years of age could be based on the mainstream definition of who engages in physical activity as well as people's own belief systems (Hendry et al., 2010). Perhaps further qualitative research about what women learn and can teach us about midlife through a physical challenge or physical activity will encourage more midlife women and men to actively seek and participate in physical activity.

A qualitative description of midlife through the experience of training for a first marathon is scarce. Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) focused on finding out what it was like for women to experience mental changes that occurred while long distance running. Runners speak of psychological benefits from running, often referring to the runner's high or a feeling of elation, confidence, strength and empowerment. The two women in the Boudreau and Giorgi study identified improved self-confidence, self awareness and enhanced relationships with others as key outcomes from their experience of long distance running. The results of the study showed a positive outlook towards a brighter future and that this was a natural outcome after exercise, not something that was a deliberate choice for the women. Through phenomenological analysis, the researchers demonstrated how a mental change associated with endurance running positively impacted the participants' lives.

Majcen's (2007) findings of first-time midlife women marathoners indicated that empowerment experiences were common and linked to the challenge of marathon training. The researcher suggests that one way to promote physical activity to midlife women is with a challenge orientation. Like Boudreau and Giorgi (2010), Majcen found that the women in the study experienced overall well-being through the experience of training for a marathon.

One study explored women runners over the age of 50 and the culture of women and running (McGowan & Smith, 2010). The researchers noted that the social discourses surrounding women's involvement in physical activity and sport have evolved over time and an increasing number of older women are participating in long distance running. According to information on the official Calgary Marathon website, there has been a



steady increase in participation over that last six years, and women represented 38% of runners in 2011. Of the female runners, 44% of them were 40-60 years of age or older.

McGowan and Smith (2010) go on to say that medical and societal discourses continue to shape and influence people's perceptions and understandings of the running culture. The scope of my study does not allow for exploration of this but cultural definitions and one's personal belief of who does and who does not participate in marathon running play a role. The following information speaks to the mainstream definitions of midlife women and running.

*Canadian Running Magazine*, Canada's only running magazine, publishes six times per year. Of the 20 issues published to September 2011, 14 presented young, fit, attractive women on the cover, five featured young, fit, attractive men and one cover had one woman and one man, young, fit and attractive. These magazine covers visually represent the western belief that physical fitness, specifically running, equals youth and beauty. The reality is that a sampling of marathons across Canada report that between 40-50% of the participants in 2011 were midlife women.

A review of current online articles in another running magazine geared specifically towards women, *Women's Running Magazine*, found articles on; motivating others in your life to run, eating disorders, proper nutrition for runners, secrets to healthy hair, buying the right shoes and sports bra, running destinations, and running injuries. About one quarter of the articles were related to weight control and eating disorders. The photos on the website that featured a runner were represented by young, fit, and attractive women. Both of these magazines reflect western society's portrayal of who participates in the exercise of running.

### **Midlife Women, Marathon Training, and Embodied Learning**

My search revealed no published literature that was specific to the embodied learning experience of midlife women training for their first marathon and that posed similar questions as my study. However, I did find research related to embodied learning through running and other forms of physical activity.

One study explored midlife women who ran a marathon and produced findings of some comparison with my study. Majcen's (2007) dissertation studied, by means of grounded theory methodology, the benefits of exercise for midlife women through the exploration of the impact of a specific marathon-training program. Psychological, social and spiritual effects of a marathon-training program on 27 midlife women were analyzed and discussed from extensive interviews.

The majority of the women in Majcen's (2007) research was Caucasian, married, highly educated, working and had children. The purpose of Majcen's study was to look at the benefits of exercise for midlife women with the focus being on the impact of the physical training. The results revealed physical changes such as weight and energy level and psychological changes in self-esteem, mood and belongingness. Additionally, the women learned a lot about themselves through the embodied experience. The women reported running as a time for introspection and being in a meditative, relaxing zone with an awareness of the body allowing for self-introspection. Integrating the mind, body, soul and spirit while long distance running can become the opportunity for spirituality through embodied learning. When asked about a spiritual connection, some of the participants in Majcen's study expressed that running enhanced their spiritual experience.

These are similar findings to those found by Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) in that participants experienced an enhanced self-awareness, self-efficacy and overall well-being. Through the embodied training process the women in these two studies gained confidence not only in their running ability but in social interaction and in their outlook of future relationships, career and educational goals. Well-being and stress reduction were found to be the goals that determined a higher level of participation in physical activity in a study with 400 women 40 to 60 years of age who were followed over a period of one year (Segar, 2006). The data indicated that midlife women with weight loss and health related goals were less motivated and participated in the least amount of exercise over time.

Straughan's (2010) investigation of the embodied aspects of scuba diving speaks to the meditative-like state experienced by scuba divers. Some of the participants in that study indicated being able to clear their minds and think of nothing while diving and others spoke of the clarity and focus they experienced while diving. In both cases the divers experienced a therapeutic-like sensation and learned from the experience. This is similar to the "runners-high" that long distance runners experience. Straughan argued that this common experience of divers is important to note because diving has become one of the world's fastest growing activities.

Participation in long distance running events has doubled over the past decade (Husted, 2012) and similar therapeutic benefits experienced by the scuba divers have been described in studies with runners. A heightened level of relaxation, positive attitude, and feelings of peace and focus were found in participants of the Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) study. In my study the women frequently wrote about being glad that they ran

because they felt great afterwards, both physically and mentally. One woman wrote, “This physical feeling affects my mental state. I can become caught up in the moment now while running” (Heather, journal entry, April 10, 2011).

It is reasonable to consider that the effects experienced through the embodied experience of training for a marathon noted by Boudreau and Giorgi (2010), and by women in my study, also contribute to the increasing popularity in long distance running. Participants in the scuba study and Boudreau and Giorgi’s study indicated that their activity, whether it was scuba diving or running, had become a crucial part of their life because of the benefits of the holistic learning experience.

### **Summary of the Literature**

The literature reflects, disputes and promotes our understanding of the midlife experience. The majority of research results find that one’s perception of aging is influenced by culture and context. Many study results have found that having a positive perception of aging is linked to higher levels of activity. The scientific and non-scientific literature on midlife women’s experience represents the conflicting views of this life-span period. The research topics on midlife women are varied with relatively little focus on exercise and marathon running. Many of the limited research efforts strive to provide health care information from a quantitative paradigm, and this is representative of the predominantly biological nature of the aging research (Markula, Grant, & Denison, 2001).

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

This chapter begins with a brief description of qualitative research. This is followed by a more detailed explanation of phenomenology, the rationale for using phenomenology in my study and a discussion of the historical development of this methodology. A description of the methods used in my study that are described as who, what, where, when and how, follow. Discussion of study validity, limitations and ethical considerations close the chapter.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative study allows researchers to question and investigate limitless topics of interest and curiosity. The emphasis is on discovery, description, and meaning (Laverty, 2003). Qualitative research attempts to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers engage in the task of making sense of what has been learned (Denzin, 2009). As I noted in Chapter 1, this study is guided by the interpretivist and phenomenologist belief that understanding the study participants' representations of their experience is the goal of research. My current qualitative study interprets the meaning the participants give to their experience of training for their first marathon at midlife. The purpose of the study is to better understand this lived experience. The small purposive sample of participants used in my study, a characteristic of qualitative research, allows for more in-depth data from a very specific area of focus. Next, I provide details of phenomenology, which is the qualitative research approach I used in this study.

### **Phenomenology: Definition and Rationale**

Phenomenology is the study of people's perception of the world with the focus on understanding from the perspective of the people being studied (Willis, 2007).

Phenomenology is descriptive and seeks to describe a lived experience by reducing individual experiences with a phenomenon to a universal description, or essence of the experience as described by the participants (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenon is the central topic or concept being studied and phenomenological study examines and describes the phenomenon, and the meaning it holds for individuals. The experience of marathon running in midlife as women, is the phenomenon of my study.

To obtain an understanding of subjective experiences, many interpretive researchers use phenomenology as the basis for their research approach (Markula et al., 2001). Phenomenology was the methodological choice to address the questions I was asking. I am not studying a specific incident, or the behaviour of a cultural group nor do I seek to generate a theory, solve a problem or describe the life experience of one individual. I want to know what it is like for women in midlife to train for a marathon, what they learn and what we can learn from their experience. Prompted by a previous autoethnography of my experience of training for a first marathon at midlife, I wondered if my experience was one that was shared by other women training for long distance running. I wondered what we could learn about this experience and midlife in general by listening to women's stories. Through the process of phenomenology, I describe the study participants' experience in order to develop an understanding of the essence of what women who take up marathon running in midlife experience. My hope is that the reader will have a real sense of living in their (running) shoes, so to speak.

**Phenomenology: Historical development.** Phenomenology has a strong philosophical component that draws heavily on the writings of Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician and philosopher who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and those who have expanded on his ideas, in particular, Martin Heidegger. I discuss Heidegger's philosophies in the next paragraph. Husserl is deemed the father of phenomenology and he described phenomenology as a discipline that seeks to describe how the world is made up and experienced through conscious acts (van Manen, 1997). It was Husserl's belief that experience is a necessary and universal feature of consciousness (Keller, 1999). Husserl believed that a researcher could reach the essence of a phenomenon in general, through understanding individuals' experiences (Husserl, 1965). Reaching an essence, or universal meaning, of the topic being studied, with a focus on understanding the phenomenon, is crucial to Husserl's understanding of phenomenological research (Laverty, 2003).

Heidegger had a more holistic view of meaning. He argued that people cannot make sense of their inner experience except by the relation that experiences have to other people and social context (Keller, 1999). Humans have the ability to understand themselves only because to be a human being is to already be in relation to other human beings in a shared world, according to Keller. Heidegger focused on "the situated meaning of a human in the world" and claimed that a person's meaning of the world and their background and experiences are inseparable (Laverty, 2003, p. 7)

There are different philosophical arguments for the use of phenomenology as a research approach. Creswell (2007) describes two possible applications of phenomenology. First, hermeneutic phenomenology, adopted by Heidegger, is research

oriented toward lived experience and the interpretation of what happens; it focuses on the “textural” description of the experiences, by a researcher. In this approach the researcher engages in self-reflection and gives consideration to their own experience and how it relates to what is being researched (Laverty, 2003). Researcher assumptions and influences are considered contributors to the research process in hermeneutic phenomenology, according to Laverty.

Second, Moustaka’s (1994) psychological or transcendental phenomenology focuses on a description of the experiences of participants and less on the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Transcendental phenomenology introduces the term *epoche*, or bracketing. Bracketing, the process through which the researcher sets aside, as far as humanly possible, all prejudgments about the phenomenon being studied, is crucial to this approach. Whereas the assumptions and influences of the researcher are considered contributors to the hermeneutic research process, in the transcendental phenomenological approach, the biases and influences are identified and then set aside (Laverty, 2003).

For the purpose of my study I have incorporated Moustaka’s (1990, 1994) approach. The transcendental form of phenomenological research is descriptive and seeks an essence of the experience as described by the participants. It is important to listen to the six women in my study who have shared the same experience. I identified my beliefs, biases, and assumptions as they related to the study phenomenon, in the Researcher Background section of Chapter 1. This process allowed for acknowledgement of my biases in order to set them aside, in order to seek a valid interpretation of the participants’ descriptions, that was independent of my position (Laverty, 2003).



### **Methods, Steps and Participants: Who, What, Where, When, and How**

Following is a discussion of the processes and procedures used in my study. I use the labels “who”, “what”, “where”, “when”, “why” and “how” to identify the considerations that went into planning and implementing my study. In phenomenology, what, the phenomenon, and who, the participants having experienced the phenomenon, are the most significant of these methodological considerations.

#### **What: The Phenomenon**

The “what” in my study is the topic or phenomenon that was investigated. The experience of women training for a first marathon at midlife, is the phenomenon or topic of my study. Understanding the meaning that the midlife women give to this experience is the purpose of my study.

#### **Who: The Participants**

The “who” in my study are the women who experienced the shared phenomenon. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling because of the narrow profile required for the study. The recruitment criteria were that participants must be midlife women, aged 40 to 65, training for their first marathon and willing to journal about their experience. Purposive sampling can decrease the generalisability of study findings; however, I maintain that learning about this experience from a small sample of midlife women who provide extensive data, can add to our understanding of midlife.

Initial attempts for recruitment through flyers (see Appendix A) posted at local Calgary running stores and fitness facilities proved unsuccessful. In October 2010 the study gained the interest of the University of Calgary (U of C) community. An article (see Appendix B) appeared in the online *UToday* magazine that is distributed to U of C

alumni, staff, faculty and students. A press release was distributed the same day and the story was picked up by local television and radio. The media coverage created an overwhelming response that allowed me to be able to select the participants.

From the 100 women who responded to the broadcasts, 10 met the final selection criteria. The remaining women who expressed interest but did not meet the criteria were given information and resources in an effort to encourage them to pursue their goal of running a marathon. I arranged an informal meeting that included me, a physiotherapist, and two running coaches. The purpose of this meeting was to provide further information to the women who were not selected as participants. A Facebook Group page was created as an additional means of contact, resources, and support for women wanting to pursue long distance running.

From the 10 prospective participants initially selected for the study, two women were injured or became ill before data was collected from them and withdrew from the study. One woman became injured just two weeks after recruitment and withdrew from the study. Another woman did the first interview but did not submit any journal entries. Although during several conversations with her she indicated she was writing and was still participating, there was no follow-up with the entries, or any other form of communication. I stopped further attempts of contact and did not include the woman as a participant in the study.

In the end, data was collected from six women during two one-on-one interviews, and from their journal entries. The women's ages ranged from 43 to 57 years. The average age of the participants was 49.6 years. The women self-identified as Canadian and all are Caucasian. The women had relatively high levels of education, all had

completed high school, four women had some post secondary education, one person had an undergraduate degree, and one had completed a master's degree. Four of the women were married and two indicated that they were in common-law relationships; all of these relationships were heterosexual. Household incomes ranged from \$75,000 to \$250,000 with half of the households earning exactly \$100,000. Three of the six women had children. In order to allow the reader to get to know the participants better, unique details about each of the participants are noted below. The names used are pseudonyms.

### **Participant Profiles**

**Sophia** is a 49 year old new runner who recently quit smoking and has a sister who is a marathon runner. Her daily life focuses on her children's schedules, volunteer work at a local church, occasional attendance at lunchtime fitness class, and participating in slow pitch in the summer. During the study, Sophia neglected her training schedule but still ran a marathon as planned because of her commitment to do so. She noted family pressures and a knee injury as the primary reasons for not training properly.

**Jessica** is a 43 year old new runner who decided to sign up with a running group because the Disneyland Race sounded fun. She did not think she would stick to it but running became an opportunity for her to get out of the house and meet new people. The household chores were primarily her responsibility. Jessica ran two marathons just two weeks apart.

**Dorothy** is 57 years old and adjusting to semi-retirement. She is finding that transitioning a to slower lifestyle is a struggle. Dorothy started walking and slowly incorporated a walk/run routine. Dorothy was a competitive athlete most of her life until

recently. Dorothy ran when she was younger and remembers and likes how she felt after running. Dorothy is training with her husband and daughters.

**Sue** is a 53 year old recent half marathon runner who was overweight and unfit before starting to run. Sue self-identified as being *obsessed* with running, running five times a week. Major surgery caused postponement of running her first marathon for a few months. Sue has a strong connection to her personal trainer and other runners.

**Genevieve** is 46 years old and has been a regular runner most of her life. Genevieve completed seven half marathons in seven of the eight previous years. Extensive travel with work takes her to remote places, making training difficult. Genevieve is devoted to running and breaking the two hour time for her last half marathon was the turning point for training for a full marathon. Genevieve has a friendly sibling rivalry with her sister, over running.

**Heather** is 49 years old and started running seven years prior to the study. Heather is running three times a week and is athletic but she noted she was never very good at anything. Running is the only thing she stuck with. Heather is dedicated to her job, working 60 hours per week. Heather has a tendency to fall into depression if not running and she enjoys solo running in quiet parks.

Although all women selected had determined they were going to train for a marathon prior to seeing the newscast, several of the women indicated that I motivated them to do so at that time. One woman shared that it was because I am midlife that caught her attention and that she may not have responded had I been younger. The woman said that when she saw me she thought “that’s me!” (Genevieve, interview, January 13, 2011). The broadcast created a climate for the study that encouraged trust,

openness and self-disclosure through a connection that the women made with me. This is an important quality when doing research with human participants. This unanticipated and interesting connection also became relevant to the outcome of my study and will be discussed later in Chapter 4: Key Findings.

### **Where: The Locations**

The “where” in the study describes both the location where the participants lived and the locations where the women ran their marathon. The “where” is less important than the “what” and the “who” in phenomenological research. In my study they are noteworthy because the women wrote a considerable amount about the challenges of training in winter conditions in Calgary and the location of the marathon had significance for some of the women.

The participants resided in Calgary, Alberta. Training for the marathon took place primarily in Calgary for the women. Some of the women traveled to other cities for vacation and/or business and continued with their running while away.

The location of the marathon each participant chose to run varied and was open for the participants to choose individually. This uncontrolled variable is not considered a factor in the validity of the study. The research is focused on the training experience leading up to the marathon, not on the actual marathon experience. The marathon that the women chose was an individual decision that was part of their experience.

### **When: Recruitment, Marathon Training, and Data Collection**

“When” in my study involved the timeframe for recruitment of participants, the length of time for the marathon training experience and the timelines for collection of the data from the six women. The timeline extended over a period of 13 months.

The process of recruitment occurred between July 2010 and November 2010, when the final selection of participants was completed. All of the women were committed to run their first marathon within 13 months of recruitment, by the end of 2011. During the process of going through the 100 responses received from interested women, I determined that a known date to run their marathon was necessary in order to eliminate women who were just thinking about long distance running for sometime in the future but it was not a specific goal that they had set. All but one of the women completed their marathon by July 2011 when the data collection commenced. The 13-month timeframe from selection of participants to completion of their marathon allowed sufficient time for the women to train for, and journal their experience of training for a first-time marathon. The journal entries were submitted over an eight-month period.

### **How: How the Data Were Collected**

One-on-one interviews and journal entries were the data used and the “how” of my study methods. This information equated to approximately 200 pages of text.

Two one-on-one interviews were conducted. A couple of days prior to both interviews, the women were given the questions in order to have time to review and think about them before meeting. The first interviews were conducted during the month of January 2011 (see Appendix D for the Interview Schedule). These interviews were face-to-face and took place in a local Calgary coffee shop. Personal interaction in a relaxed setting contributed to the comfort of the participants and the interviewer. It is important for the researcher to focus on putting the participant at ease during the interview (Eisner, 1997). This helps to ensure an open sharing of information by the participants. The interviews lasted between 45 to 75 minutes.

The second interview was conducted in June and July 2011 (see Appendix E for the Interview Schedule). These interviews were conducted over the telephone in an effort to respect the participants' time. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 45 minutes. Both interviews with each of the six women were audio-recorded with permission, and I took hand-written notes.

The women were asked to record their experiences in a journal. Participants were welcome to choose the format and style of their writings in order to allow freedom of expression. Minimal guidelines (see Appendix H) were given and I explained that there was no right or wrong way in terms of what, when or how to write. The women forwarded their entries to me electronically anywhere from every two weeks to once a month. Five women sent their journals in typed text format, and one woman sent scanned hand-written entries. The frequency of writing varied from every day to once a week. The total amount of text received from each of the women varied from 20 pages to 75 pages.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process can proceed in a number of ways in phenomenological investigation (Laverly, 2003). The method of data analysis that I followed is described below. It is based on procedures outlined by Creswell (2007) whose approach is a simplified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis that is discussed by Moustakas (1994). I created a visual representation of my interpretation of the process that Creswell describes (see Appendix I).

Data analysis involved listening to the interviews and reading the transcribed notes several times. As I noted above, interviews were audio-recorded, and I took notes. I transcribed all interviews to allow for a second listening to the information, as well as to

ensure the accuracy of the transcription so that everything said was included verbatim. The transcribed notes were read at least three more times, words and phrases were highlighted, and codes and categories were assigned.

Analysis of the data also involved reading the journal entries over and over with significant statements and quotations identified that highlighted the participant's experiences of the phenomenon. The first reading was quick and without thought or analysis. I absorbed myself in the data just to hear what was being said for overall impressions. The second reading involved coding by highlighting key words, repeated words, and words that evoked feeling. Emerging themes and categories in these highlighted words and phrases were noted. Subsequent readings involved scrutiny with further significant words, sentences, and phrases identified until a level of saturation of reached that no new themes emerged and the three key themes were identified.

This was an extensive process. I surrounded myself with the words and descriptions, on my desk, on the walls, on the floor. I drew models, mind maps and charts in my quest to interpret the meaning the women gave to their experience. This process was carried out over a twelve-month period allowing for contemplation and reflection of the information. It was of utmost importance to spend the time necessary to ensure due consideration was given to the information the women had so generously provided. Phenomenological research demands this of its researchers.

Saldana (2009) was a helpful resource for coding. He identified coding patterns as characterized by similarity, difference, frequency (i.e., something happens seldom or often), sequence (things happen in a certain order), correspondence (where things happen



in relation to other things) and causation (where one thing appears to cause another). I focused on these patterns when coding the text.

Groups of meanings from the women's statements were developed into themes and the themes became written descriptions of what the participants experienced. This is described in Creswell (2007) as the "textural" description. Creswell further describes the outlining of the context that influenced how the phenomenon was experienced as the structural description. These are the factors that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon (i.e., obstacles, motivation, fears). Specific general questions were asked during the interviews that focused on getting at both the "textural" and the structural descriptions of the experience. Answers to these questions are identified in Chapter 4: Key Findings. Journal entries by the women also spoke to what they were experiencing and the context and factors that affected their experience.

From the "textural" and structural descriptions I prepared a merged description, giving an overall "essence" of the experience of the women's experience of training for a first marathon at midlife. This merged description is the heart of phenomenological analysis. In addition to these descriptions, the responses to the research questions were analyzed and summarized.

In addition to manually coding and organizing the data, I used NVivo (version 9), a qualitative data analysis software package. This step allowed for additional reading of the texts from the women. Participant responses to each of the research questions were entered into categories, or nodes, as they are referred to in NVivo. Words and phrases relevant to the initial 23 themes that were manually identified were also entered into the software. Use of the software was very helpful for organizing the extensive data.

Subsequent manual analysis followed involving re-reading of the manually coded and categorized data and re-reading of the categories identified from the computer software.

### **Validity**

One of the central issues in qualitative research is validity, also known as credibility and or dependability (Clayton, 2010). There are extensive strategies and perspectives regarding the definition of validation in qualitative research and the procedures used to establish it. Some of the different methods I used to establish validity and are described below are member checking, peer reviews, triangulation, prolonged engagement and bracketing. These are accepted practices that strengthen qualitative research validity, according to Clayton.

The process of member checking involved study participants being consulted by me to verify my interpretation of data. The women were asked on two separate occasions to confirm the accuracy of my description of the information they provided during the interviews and in their journal entries. Half of the women provided feedback on my analysis of their responses. All of the women who responded confirmed that my understanding of the interviews and journals accurately reflected the meaning they gave to their experience. Throughout the study I engaged in conversation with peers and my study supervisor who questioned and reviewed elements of the study. Triangulation involves using information from different data sources. The different data sources I used were interviews and journal entries. The data I used was recorded and collected from an extended eight-month timeframe. The process of bracketing was carried out and is defined in the historical development of phenomenology section of this chapter.

I presented the findings with rich, thick descriptions allowing for readers to get a strong sense of the experiences of the women. Thick descriptions give the context of an experience, indicate the intentions and meanings behind the experience and reveal the experience as a process while, in comparison a thin description states only the facts excluding intentions and circumstance (Denzin, 2009). All information was presented in the findings, including different and perhaps opposing experiences.

Further to validity, criteria that can be used to judge the quality of my study include an understanding of the philosophical background of phenomenology, inclusion of a clear phenomenon, the use of procedures of data analysis, conveyance of the overall essence of the experience and reflexivity, or disclosure, of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). I was conscious of these measures and incorporated them into my study as outlined in this chapter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Consistent with academic protocol I applied for ethics approval from the appropriate governing body and I followed the guidelines required for participant consent forms. Ethics approval for my study was awarded by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. An informed consent form outlining all of the ethical considerations was reviewed and signed by all participants (see Appendix C).

I was sensitive to the heartfelt and personal information that would be required to be shared by the women in my study. I made it clear both verbally and in writing, to all women interested in participating that journaling of personal experience was a criterion for selection and participation in the study. Participation was voluntary and the women could withdraw at any time and/or choose not to answer any question during the

interviews. Women either were given a pseudonym or chose their own, in order to protect their confidentiality. Research with human participants involved warrants more than these verbal and written protections of both the researcher and the participant. Because of this I was mindful and appreciative of the women's time and commitment to the study and treated them with respect, honesty and consideration.

## CHAPTER 4: KEY FINDINGS

Phenomenology, the approach used in my study, relies on the description of the experience as told by participants; therefore, extensive quotations from the women are included throughout this chapter. Again, the purpose of this research is to interpret the meaning the women gave to their experience as identified through their words and voices.

In this chapter the results of the data analysis are reviewed. Details of the analysis process can be found in Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods. As a brief reminder, over 200 pages of data were collected from the six participants through interviews and journal entries. Initially, over 20 high frequency and meaningful words, statement and categories were identified from the information (see Appendix F). One of the questions I asked the women during the second interview was to state five words that they would use to describe midlife in general, and five words to describe their experience of training for a marathon at midlife. The list of words can be found in Appendix G.

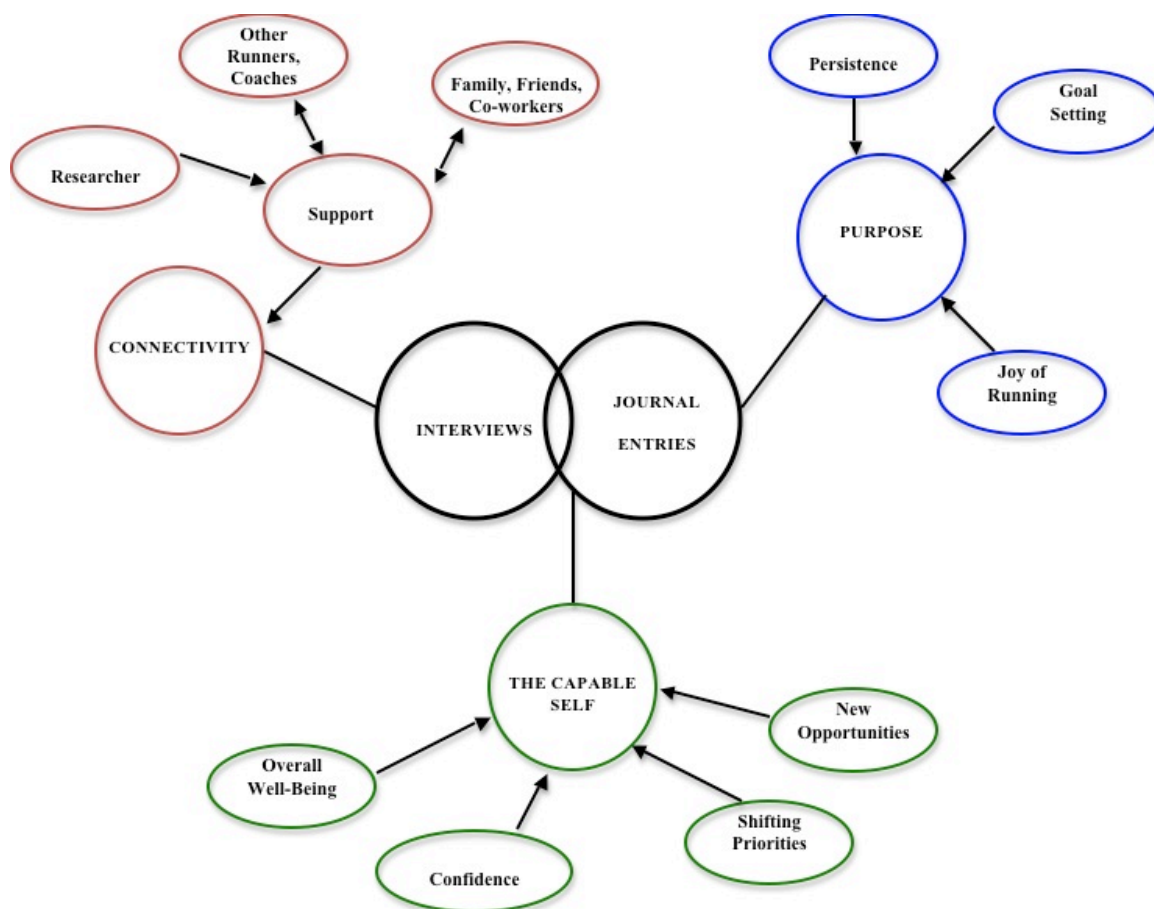
From all of this information, I identified three key themes: the capable self, connectivity, and purpose. A discussion of these opens this chapter. The answers to the research questions follow. There was some overlap in findings between the significant themes and the answers to the research questions. By reviewing the key themes first, meanings of the experience are discussed, which adds clarity and depth to the research question answers that follow.

Next, the textural description, the structural description, and the overall essence of the phenomenon as described by the women, are discussed. These terms are explained in

detail in Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods. A summary of the findings closes this chapter.

### Significant Themes

As I discussed in the Methods section of Chapter 3, I read and re-read the participants' journal entries and interview scripts several times. Statements and words evolved into broad themes and three significant themes emerged that were representative of the women's experience. These three themes, the capable self, connectivity, and purpose, are discussed in detail below. Figure 1 is my visual representation of the key themes.



*Figure 1. Key themes.*

## **The Capable Self**

The women revisited their sense of self while taking on a challenge that they thought was unattainable, and that became a reality, and connected that to building an understanding of themselves as women in midlife. “Running is a big part of my life now” said Heather during her interview (January 15, 2011). This is a sentiment expressed by all of the women in my study. Heather acknowledged that running was not only a part of her life but she said, “It’s a huge part of my identity” (interview, January 15, 2011). The phenomenon was something new for all of the women, not like anything else they had ever experienced. Their subjective identity, what they conceived themselves to be, changed, with the addition of runner as a new role. As well, their objective identity, that is, how the women were viewed independently of how they saw themselves, changed. Specific examples of these changes are discussed below.

**Shifting priorities.** During the training, the women experienced a definite shift in their priorities. Midlife can be a time of transition when women’s priorities shift due to life changes in career and family. By taking on the challenge of training for a first marathon, the women became more self-aware, and they acknowledged that their own needs and desires were important and they gave themselves top priority. The women came to focus on their training and their eating habits, they eliminated bad habits, for example smoking for one woman, and they incorporated their training into their daily lives and routines.

This was a change from putting their families and friends, and their work first. For example, by asking and allowing their children and husbands to jump in and help with dinner so that they could get into their running gear and be out the door on time to meet

with their running group, the women validated their own worth and importance. “It was always about the rest of the family, and now I keep telling myself that this is about me” (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011). One woman stated that her co-workers were learning that she wasn’t jumping to all of their needs and that they were responding to that by being more respectful of her boundaries. This change in identity for the women was not without struggle over the western society standard that women are selfish if others’ needs are not given first priority. A participant’s journal entry revealed the angst that she felt:

Maybe the question should be why do I always feel guilty to run on Thursdays? I want all the shit work done (garbage, laundry, dinner, dinner, dinner on the table) but I want to run. Obviously I’ve been strong enough to let my guilt not push me because I haven’t missed a Thursday but that doesn’t mean I’m not feeling bad while running. Is someone going to starve? Will someone cry if their favourite socks are not in the cupboard? Then why does this get to me? It’s my own inner struggle. (Jessica, journal entry, November 25, 2010)

**Increased confidence.** All of the women experienced a significant increase in their overall confidence. “I know I’m strong now and I don’t give up. I did something for me for the first time in my life. I know I can keep going and not give up” (Sue, interview, May 31, 2011). Another woman wrote,

This experience has given me some confidence as to my physical abilities. And now knowing that I still have a competitive spirit brings back youthfulness. I even see myself continuing to run after the goal is met! (Dorothy, journal entry, January 20, 2011)



Accomplishing goals along the way and running a marathon proved their capabilities to be successful, and helped the women to believe that they were in control, of life in general, and of training for the marathon. The women ran distances and speeds that progressed and they reached milestones they had never reached before. This resulted in new levels of confidence. One woman wrote, “I’m kind of impressed with myself that I am able to do this. I couldn’t run a quarter of a mile two years ago, plus I was overweight and unfit” (Sue, interview, May 31, 2011).

For some of the women the increased confidence was accompanied by periods of doubt, “How do I stop that anxiety? That ‘I’m not good enough’ thought” (Jessica, journal entry, January 27, 2011). The women experienced more doubt at the beginning of the training versus later on. One woman wrote,

I was a little discouraged earlier. That is probably why I didn’t make any entries. It is always easier to be excited and write about it when all is going well. I really am only accountable to myself and was still disappointed when I missed a scheduled run day. I had told myself I was going to do this and, all of a sudden I was taking a day off and I felt it was early on in my training and I was heading for a slippery slope. (Dorothy, journal entry, December 17, 2010)

As time went by in the training and the women became stronger and ran further, and were successful in meeting new goals, the confidence increased and the doubt faded and eventually disappeared. All of the women experienced a return of doubt as the marathon date became closer. The fear of injury and of not being able to reach their goal, and worry about not being able to run a distance longer than what they had ever run, topped their doubt list. Once the marathon date arrived and the women had completed the

training relatively injury free, the doubt vanished and all of the women who ran their marathon before final analysis of the data were confident that they would finish the race.

**New opportunities.** The possibilities in the women's lives became limitless as the confidence extended into all aspects of their lives. The women's newfound confidence led to discovering new opportunities. The women were more open to others and to new situations. They were more flexible in their thinking and actions, and doing something for themselves became a part of their decisions in every realm of their lives. The women considered themselves wiser and enjoyed the respect they received from younger people. "I'm surprised how the experience as a whole just sort of flows into the rest of your life" (Jessica, interview, June 17, 2011). Heather shared this sentiment and said, "I'm really aware that I can do it. It has totally changed me to the point of being more confident and knowing that I can get through some pretty difficult things, not only the race" (interview, June 16, 2011). Another woman agreed, "I'm capable of doing more than I think. Not just running but in terms of oh, maybe I can try for that job. Maybe I can experience the pain of change" (Sophia, interview, July 25, 2011).

**Overall well-being.** The benefits experienced from the physical activity of running became integrated into the women's lives. All of the women experienced an overall sense of well-being as a result of feeling more self-assured, happy, hopeful, physically stronger, and healthy. One woman said, "The whole process has been very inspiring, that is the first word that comes to mind, is inspiring." She went on to say,

And I'm proud of the change in my body. Not that I set out to change it, but it did, you know with that amount of exercise. No, I absolutely never set out to change my body. But now I can say I'm 50 and fit! And I decided I was going to be

healthy. Life is too short. Don't sweat the small stuff. I am going to appreciate things more. I'm not going to work my butt off like I had. I am going to enjoy things more. (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011)

As my earlier review of empirical literature establishes, there is undisputed research in exercise that suggests that physical activity improves physical and psychological health and overall well-being (Majcen, 2007, Netz et al., 2008, Stocker, 2009). The findings in my study support suggestions that exercise may be of particular relevance to midlife women who may be at risk for physical and psychological difficulties during midlife and whose identity is shifting and evolving (Majcen, 2007). Overwhelmingly, the women experienced a feeling of well-being that they had never experienced before.

### **Connectivity**

The second major theme identified as an important outcome of the experience for the women was connection. The women experienced new connections as their roles and responsibilities shifted from wife, mother, daughter, colleague, and sister to include long distance runner. The women connected with themselves, and they renewed and developed new connections with their families, their friends and their co-workers. Some of the women in the study reported an appreciation and connection with the beauty of nature as they ran through parks and on beaches. They noticed smells and sights that they could not have without the experience of running. One woman demonstrated this when she wrote,

The snow was softly falling and it was just beautiful and I kept going and going. It was cold but I got down into Fish Creek and two deer came out and were

standing right on the pathway and I was the only person around. That's another thing I love about running, moments like that. (Heather, journal entry, December 19, 2010)

As already discussed and relevant here, the women became more confident through the experience of training for their first marathon. Because of this they subsequently engaged in more activities with new people. These new connections enriched their lives and the lives of those they connected with. The women ran with running groups, and they socialized with members of the group. Through these new connections the women provided and received support. The women welcomed the new relationships. Jessica wrote, "That's another reason for running, just to meet other people. It's a breath of fresh air to meet people that you don't work with everyday" (journal entry, March 18, 2011). The experience also created new connections at work as one woman explained,

People know more about running from me. I find that people that you don't really talk to at work are now approaching you at work. You feel like a mini celebrity for a while. So it's opened up relationships, people that you wouldn't normally talk to you are now talking to you. (Jessica, interview, January 10, 2011)

The women's sense of self was developed by the experience of being in connection with others who shared a common commitment and understanding. The women made connections with the running community by sharing an interest, and by encouraging and motivating each other. One woman wrote about this connection, "Afterwards I went for a drink with some of the group members. It was a showing of hardware, too. That was kind of exciting. I think I was the only 'virgin' there" (Jessica,

interview, June 17, 2011). The women loved being with like-minded people and enjoyed the support that they received.

Not only did the women enjoy the support that they received, it became invaluable to their success in meeting their goal. Training to run 42.2 kilometres is undeniably a difficult and often lonely challenge. The women in my study have attested to that. The women learned that they could not have completed the training or the marathon without the support of others, especially during the isolating times. The women experienced support from family, friends, coworkers, running coaches and fellow runners. These supporters encouraged the women even while, in some cases, they questioned the sanity of the women's decision and asked "You're going to do what?!" (Dorothy, journal entry, November 18, 2010).

Mostly, though, the concern the people in the women's lives had was about the women's well-being. Jessica said "I do have people who don't understand and question it from their heart because they care, not because they think I'm an idiot sort of thing" (Jessica, interview, January 10, 2011). At times when the women did not receive support from friends or spouses, they were quick to note, "It's for me anyway" (Heather, interview, January 15, 2011). The women believed in themselves and gave themselves permission to do something just for themselves.

In Heather's case, training for a marathon was something that occurred during a difficult time when she and her family needed something to look forward to. Heather received support from her family. At the same time, the family members came to rely on Heather's pursuit of running a marathon as something positive to focus on. For Heather's

family the experience got them all through a very tragic time of multiple deaths within their circle of family and friends. Heather wrote in her journal,

I think I am using the running for therapy. God knows what I would be like if I didn't run. So much sad stuff going on, the weather sucks, the days are short.

Glad I have something to focus on. Even if I don't end up running the marathon, this is really helping me mentally to stay together this year. (Heather, journal entry, March 22, 2011)

Undeniably, the support that the women received was invaluable to their experience. The women came to know who was part of their support system, and who was not. "The kids are encouraging and supportive. Most of my friends are, although there are some that you don't talk too much about it with because they are sedentary or whatever I don't know" (Sue, interview, January 6, 2011). The women also realized the strength and importance of the support that they had. Genevieve said, "I've always had a good support system and this experience reinforced my belief" (interview, May 30, 2011)

One woman was appreciative that her husband and daughters were at the finish line for her marathon. Although she did not rely on anyone else to get her through the training and the marathon, she appreciated the support that she received throughout the training and during the marathon. The desire of not letting people down helped motivate her during the training.

In addition to receiving support from husbands, children, friends, family members, and co-workers, the women indicated that I was a valuable part of their support system. I did not anticipate this role when planning the research; however, given my relatedness to the women, as a marathon runner and midlife woman, it is understandable

that all of the women indicated that they considered me as part of their support network.

Genevieve said,

Your advice and thoughts throughout my training were very helpful and motivating. I had my motivators but I don't know if I never heard from you during the past few months if I would have continued. I very much appreciated that. It was just the right amount of contact. (Genevieve, interview, May 30, 2011)

To close this section on connectivity is an example of an unfortunate situation that occurred. Because of a misunderstanding, one of the women considered withdrawing from the study after realizing that her marathon date was to occur after the data collection phase had passed. The woman changed her mind and completed the second interview; however, her distress at the time when she realized that she would run her marathon after the study concluded, is clear in her journal entry:

This will be my last journal entry. I was very disappointed to find out that all the data would be collected by the end of June. It was very motivational for me to be part of a select group of women all with the same goal and I approached the challenge with a lot of energy. I have lost some of that dedication to its completion. It took the wind out of my sails for sure. I will still continue on my own with the support of my family and we still have the goal of a marathon in mind. I will just do it without the support of the research project, that's all.

(Dorothy, journal entry, May 1, 2011)

This example addresses the importance that support and connection played in the experience for the women.

## **Purpose**

The third key theme that emerged was the notion of purpose. The women talked and wrote about their short-term and long-term goals and the importance of having goals. The women were motivated to complete the marathon because they set that goal. As Sue said, “Having a goal is important, and I have to have a goal to finish” (interview, May 31, 2011). It was important to the women to live up to their word.

**Persistence and setting goals.** The persistence and commitment that the women exhibited throughout their training spoke to the importance of setting goals and meeting goals at midlife. The women endured physical pain, horrible winter running conditions, emotional heartache, and psychological set-backs throughout the training period. One woman addressed all of these issues in the following journal entry:

I’m so tired going into this run. My legs are sore, my back is sore, my hips are sore. Should I be doing this? I’m not going to get any better if I don’t and if I get hurt well then maybe the marathon wasn’t meant to be. I’m not going with the group today because it’s going to rain or snow by that time. I’m going by myself after work and just getting it done. I loved it even though I was sore as hell. I ran an extra long hill at the end just to show myself that I can. It totally killed my quads but that’s okay. I did it! (Jessica, journal entry, December 2, 2010)

The women continued and persevered because they were committed to the goal of running a marathon and they embraced and stressed the importance of setting goals during midlife. The women set many short-term and long-term goals along the way. Examples of their daily goals included, “to stay steady and strong and just build confidence” (Sue, journal entry, November 14, 2010), “Setting a goal each time I get on



the treadmill is a step in the right direction” (Dorothy, journal entry, November 22, 2010). Some days the goal was just to get to bed and sleep! Longer term goals included weekly and monthly training schedules and monthly races of five or 10 kilometers. The women often wrote of reaching their final goal and finishing the marathon. Sophia spoke for them all when she said, “There was no way I was going to quit” (interview, January 27, 2011). Some of the women looked even further ahead to subsequent marathons after the study completion.

For one woman, enduring the challenges was worth it in order to dedicate her marathon run to sick and dying family and friends. She wrote,

Only ran 40 minutes today (-30). Not thinking much these days, two of our closest friends to our family are in the hospital fighting cancer, both stage 4. Running is the only time I am not thinking about this. I am keeping motivated, and when I run the marathon, it will be for all these people fighting cancer. (Heather, journal entry, January 9, 2011)

The women were determined to finish something that they said they would and they did not want to let the people in their lives down. For some of the people who doubted them, the women wanted to show them that they could do it, but mostly they wanted to set a good example about having purpose and following through on goals. As Sue said, “People encouraged me, family, running coach and friends, and you don’t want to let them down. And I probably wanted others to be proud of me, whether that is right or wrong, that’s how I felt” (May 31, 2011). It was important to Sophie to show her daughters that she could do it and she said, “I think they are really happy that I did complete it and you know, I was glad that they could see that” (Sophia, interview, July

25, 2011). The women realized that they inspired their friends, family and coworkers and they were happy to see those who took up running experience the same benefits from running that they did.

It was important to the women to be healthy and this desire was another driving force behind the pursuit of their goals. The women were exposed to illnesses and deaths of people in their lives and they acknowledged the higher health risks for women at midlife. They wanted to do whatever they could to maintain their health and this was a significant motivator for the women. The women believed that being active and eating nutritiously would help them to stay healthy and avoid illness. This belief was part of their purpose for training for a marathon.

**The joy of running.** Additionally, the women reported that they always felt good after they ran. Knowing that they would feel better physically and/or psychologically after a run helped the women get out the door on those difficult days, like the one described below,

Very cold day (-14) and snowing. Very hard to motivate myself today to get out and run, hubby is on the couch with a blanket, looks like a good place to be but today I am committed to keep to my running schedule. I must complete 1 hour 25 minute run according to my plan. (Heather, journal entry, November 21, 2010)

The running was not just about maintaining health, relieving stress, reaching a goal, building confidence, or overall well-being. The six women loved to run just for the sake of running, they described it as an amazing experience that felt good and something that they could not imagine stopping. Following are the answers to the two research questions.

### **Returning to my Research Questions**

Earlier in Chapter 1, I outlined two guiding research questions. My first research question asked, “What do midlife women learn holistically about themselves, others in their life and the world around them through the experience of training for a marathon at midlife?” My second question asked, “What can we learn about the meaning of midlife by listening to women’s descriptions of their experience?” In this section, I return to these questions and extend my analysis in relation to them.

#### **Inner Strength**

The women learned of an inner strength they did not know they had by challenging their bodies and minds in a way that they had not done before. The women listened to their bodies and learned about their physical, as well as psychological, strengths and weaknesses. Training at such an extreme level brought the women to a place that they had never been before. Their bodies, their senses and their minds were tested and stretched to new limits. They learned that they were capable of more than they thought they were, and not just in terms of training for a marathon, “I’m strong and determined, moreso that I’m getting older” (Sue, interview, May 31, 2011), “Being older has made me more appreciative of what I can do. I sure found out that I am a heck of a lot tougher than I thought I was!” (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011), “I can do what I set my mind to, I have an inner core that is pretty strong” (Sophia, interview, July 25, 2011), “I’m capable of doing more than I think and not just with running” (Jessica, interview, June 17).

All of the women learned that they were more physically capable than they thought they could be. The women were often surprised with their accomplishments but

embraced them. Accomplishing new physical feats contributed to the women's inner strength. Jessica summed it up by saying "I've proved to myself I can do whatever is asked of me or my body. I'm strong. I'm ready. Bring it on" (interview, June 17, 2011).

As discussed in the section about the capable self, all of the women learned that they were more open to taking risks than previously in their lives and this was because of the inner strength they learned that they had. The women approached things differently, with new or renewed confidence, at work, at home and they engaged in new activities.

### **About Learning**

The women had a lot of time for introspection while training for their marathon, and time for reflection while journal writing. The women learned that they were happy and satisfied with what they had accomplished. At the same time the women recognized that there was much more they wanted to learn. One woman expressed this eagerness:

Oh there's so much more that I want to learn, so many things I need to find out that I don't understand, I love chocolate, but I don't understand where it comes from, love wine but don't really understand where it comes from. And I am completely enthralled by the prospect of micro-financing to solve poverty for women in third world countries but I can't figure out how it works?! I want to know, I want to know, I want to go find out!! (Genevieve, interview, January 13, 2011)

In addition to what she was learning and wanted to learn, Genevieve thought about how learning took place through the experience of running, journaling and reflecting. She recognized that there are different ways of learning and that her approach to learning was quite different than 20 years previous when she was a university student.

Genevieve realized that she was comfortable with approaching new things less systematically and instead with a more relaxed approach. This was because of her experience and subsequent readiness for taking risks. Genevieve described this below,

So I think the method is more experiential now. More risk taking. Cause if you are going to rely on experience; you've got to take a risk. I think I have more tolerance of risk now and less concern about the consequences. That doesn't make me careless it just makes me, it makes my world a little less tightly wound, a little less stressful. (Genevieve, journal entry, January 15, 2011)

### **Priorities**

The women came to realize the difference between having to do something and wanting to do something. The women learned about priorities and choice. "It has really helped me recognize and believe that I am in control" (Genevieve, journal entry, February 12, 2011). The women made choices that allowed them time to train because they enjoyed running. One woman wrote,

Instead of dreading exercise, now I ensure that it is done on a daily basis. Very few, if any, days go by without some kind. A couple of months ago, I might have just canceled doing the run. Now I will make sure I get the run done first. I am feeling great about how far I have come and about how focused I still am. I actually look forward to working out, that's new ... haha. (Dorothy, journal entry, February 5, 2011)

### **Acceptance of Others**

By learning about themselves the women also increased their awareness about others. Sophia developed a more positive attitude that helped her to understand others and

the world around her. She realized that having a better awareness of herself helped her to “know that people are just the way they are and they may understand things differently and see the world differently than she did” (interview, July 25, 2011). She learned that not saying anything in some situations was a good solution. The women spoke of the merits of this wisdom and that younger people respected the knowledge that they had. “I like the feeling of being respected for the age that I’m at, for the knowledge that I have” (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011).

I identified connection as a key theme previously in this chapter. It was also a noteworthy learning experience by the women. Through their new connections, the women learned that they inspired others in their lives. One woman noticed that extended family members were eating a healthier diet and exercising more. She believed this was due to the changes she had made in her life and she learned about the effect she had on others. Another woman said during the second interview,

I find that with colleagues and friends when you talk about running a marathon and they were like, why would you want to do that. But after you’ve done it, it’s like, wow good for you, that’s an accomplishment! They seemed supportive of it and thought maybe they’ll do it one day. Their attitude changed. (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011)

### **Body and Mind and Learning**

Although the women struggled with the concept of embodied learning, they acknowledged that their environment affected their experience, perhaps because it played a significant role in their training. The women learned how strong they were after forcing themselves to run on ice and snow and in -30 degrees temperatures. The women became

more aware of sights and smells and these triggered memories and promoted reflection. “While running you smell something and you think ‘oh my grandmother’s house used to smell like that,’ or especially where my heart lies, you smell that dampness or the dirt and it smells like the coast” (Sue, interview, January 6, 2011).

Some of the women became familiar with a mind body connection. They came to learn for instance, that 20 or 30 minutes into a long run that the pain and discomfort would lessen and then they would start to enjoy what they were doing. Heather stated, “anything happening in the mind, the body has already told us about” (interview, June 16, 2011). Heather acknowledged that this is learned, and that it has taken her until midlife and the experience of training for a marathon, in particular, to learn to listen to her body and not to accept that learning takes place only in her mind. Genevieve also spoke about the newness of listening to her body and having a mind body connection. She wrote,

I’ve learned to listen to my body and that was new. After one tough short run, I sat down and cried, and I learned to listen to that. I was tired. That was a mind body connection that I don’t think I ever had. (Genevieve, journal entry, March 13, 2011)

Genevieve experienced another mind body connection that she didn’t have previous to her training and before participating in this study and wrote,

I didn’t learn that standing tall would make breathing easier for a tired body, I already knew that. What I did learn is that I have to check in with my body when I’m running and run down a physical check-list of sorts at key points in the run. Maybe I can remember to do this before I hear the thump thump of my feet on the ground. (Genevieve, journal entry, March 13, 2011)

Sue came to trust her body. “I know I can put it through this stress and it will respond” (interview, May 31, 2011), she said. Dorothy wrote about her mind/body connection after a good run day, “I am enjoying the feeling that I have taken control of my physical day and it is improving my emotional day” (journal entry, December 19, 2010).

I return to a point I made in the Introduction that the body can know things before the mind with the example of one woman who noticed she had an upset stomach before her first meeting with a running group. She realized later after thinking about the experience, while journaling, that she was concerned about having the right tools (i.e., a water bottle or a water bottle belt) and being dressed appropriately for the conditions. Essentially she had doubts about being properly equipped and fitting in with the group. It was not until later that she understood what the bodily sensations were telling her. In all of the above examples, the women experienced the mind and the body working together in support of the holistic learning philosophy.

### **Transition and Change**

Midlife is a time of transition and change and the experiences of the women in my study confirm this. We learn from the six women that midlife is a time of changing roles and of embracing the new roles. All of the women identified midlife as a time that was different from any other phase in their lives, and that being middle aged gave them the time, confidence, and determination to try new things. One woman said,

I think it’s more of an awareness of what I am coming into and what I’m faced with. Just with life right. I’m learning a lot about myself, I’m thinking a lot about what I can do better, what I can do to help people more instead of just having



work drive my life you know. I can do other things. That's what I'm looking for.

(Heather, interview, June 16, 2011)

The women reported that midlife is a time of new challenges and taking risks, and that midlife is the right time for the challenge of running a marathon. They did not consider their age to be a deterrent to long distance running, but rather considered it a contributing factor to their success. In reference to being tired, Jessica said, "It's just the training and not a sign of age or winter blues" (interview, January 10, 2011). Heather was in agreement, and stated, "I think if I was younger, I probably wouldn't have completed it. And the other younger ones in the group are afraid if I beat them then it's time to take up checkers" (interview, June 16, 2011) Genevieve's comment reflected the sentiment of all of the women in regards to midlife being a time of transition and taking risks when she said, "You start to think about well, what's the worst thing that could happen?" (interview, May 30, 2011).

### **Time for Self**

The redefined roles that the women in my study experienced, allowed for more time to pursue things for themselves and they were encouraged to take on new challenges that demanded time and commitment. The women defined midlife as a phase that they had the freedom and flexibility to do something just for them, for the first time in their adult lives. Sue and Sophia voiced a commonality amongst the women by saying, "This is probably the first thing I have ever done for me" and "I keep telling myself that this is about me" (interviews January 6, 2011, January 27, 2011).

Although the women noted that they were enjoying doing something that was just for them, they had initial reservations about their decisions. Some of the women

questioned the time and attention to themselves, and one woman used the word *selfish* to describe her involvement. The women were experiencing changing roles in the home and at work that meant less time caring for, and tending to, other people's needs. "It was always about the rest of the family. And now I keep telling myself, no, this is about me. I have to get into the mindset that this is about me and I'm going to do this for me" (Sue, interview, January 6, 2011). "I'm really trying to focus on me first which is a switch" (Genevieve, interview, January 13, 2011). As time went by, and the training progressed, the guilt that the women felt lessened and disappeared. Sue wrote in her journal, "By the time I'm done with my run it's still early enough to get a decent dinner on and enjoy the evening, then again being out running with the group means less time in the kitchen." As Sue noted months after the study began, "The guilt has long gone ☺" (journal entry, February 11, 2011). Initially Sue was concerned that the birth of her first grandchildren would interfere with her training and she felt guilty about thinking that.

### **Positive Experience**

Overall, the women were excited and happy about their life and the time they spent running and training. They said over and over again "I'm happy I did this, I'm grateful to be able to do this, I'm so fortunate to be able to do this." For the six women midlife was less about regret and loss than what the mainstream culture would have one believe, and it was more about hopefulness and new opportunities. Sue's comment supported this,

I'm pretty optimistic. Things are good right now. I feel very fortunate that I can do what I do right now and not have little kids to worry about. It wasn't always

like this, with kids and volunteering. It's time for me. (Sue, interview, January 6, 2011)

In addition to being a time of hopefulness and optimism, midlife for these women was a time of being satisfied with what one has done in her life. The following excerpt from an interview with a participant is an example of this,

I'm pretty accomplished in my life and have had to struggle with my choices with work and travel and getting in the training but now, at this time in my life, I believe that I can make choices, I can pick my travel days, I can skip a morning meeting to go for a run, I'm in control of the choices that I make and I don't feel bad about it. I always knew that and I think this is a midlife thing, that it's really up to me now. (Genevieve, interview, January 13, 2011)

### **Urgency**

Midlife can be described as a time of urgency as reported by the women in my study. One woman said, "Middle age has brought with it this sense of urgency. I feel like I have 'arrived' and yet I feel like I've only 'just started' and I'm running out of time" (Genevieve, interview, May 30, 2011). Midlife is characterized as a time for people to face mortality and to take stock of what they have and have not done in their lives. The meaning that the women in my study gave to their experience of midlife in general, and of the training experience, supports this portrayal. The urge to learn, take risks, set goals, and take on new challenges, identify the issue of mortality as being a part of the women's midlife experience.

For Genevieve, enjoying the training was particularly important, even more important than the goal of finishing the marathon. Genevieve realized just how much

humour and fun were a part of her life and the importance of enjoying her experiences. Midlife is a time for people to acknowledge the stage one is at in their life cycle, and one's mortality becomes undeniable. It is a time to make the best of the time remaining. By stressing the importance of fun, of "enjoying the journey," the women were taking advantage of time they had for themselves, and that they had with friends and family.

### **Setting Goals**

Another key theme described above, purpose, addressed the question of what we can learn about midlife in general from the women's experience. Having short-term and long-term goals is important in midlife, and there was a realization by the women in my study that their goals, even as lofty as running a marathon, were attainable. The women confirmed that it was also just as important, if not more important to enjoy the process of achieving goals. One woman wrote, "If there is anything I am learning in my middle age it is that you have to strive for the goal but also enjoy the journey along the way" (Genevieve, journal entry, March 16, 2011).

The women set goals, met them, and enjoyed the experience. They all believed that they would reach their goal of running a marathon. The women described midlife as a time for setting goals. One woman wrote, "Goals are important to me. Sometimes I wonder why I am doing this but I know it makes me feel good and gives me purpose" (Sue, journal entry, November 15, 2010). The word goal was written again and again in the women's journals.

### **Contradictions**

For the women in my study, midlife was also a time of oppositeness and inconsistencies. This can be explained by a number of factors. First, midlife is not, and

has not been, a constant over time. Time in history, demographics, homeland, education, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, marital status, children or no children, race, and culture all impact what defines midlife, and what is experienced in midlife. Second, mainstream definitions, popular literature, and the scientific literature affect the definition and experience of midlife.

The women in my study reported feeling younger than how it was defined in the media, popular culture, and by how some family members and friends experienced and described it. Midlife was not considered old to the six women, as these comments indicated: Sophia welcomed her birthday, “50 is just a number” and “I used to think ‘I’m getting old’ but now I think, ‘yeah I get another one’,” and “To think that someone is really done when you are only 57 years old is so narrow-minded, you know.”

The mother of one participant used menopause as an excuse for anything that was happening during midlife for her daughter and told her daughter, “I think it’s time you go see your doctor, dear.” This supports the biomedical focus that some of the negative symptoms of midlife need to be controlled and fixed by medical professionals, and that a woman’s body is out of her control. As the woman continued through her training, she reported that her mother had a change in attitude that did not support her previous views that were based on what she had been led to believe. The participant spoke of her mother’s change, “She has sort of shifted from pushing me to just take the drugs and attribute it to menopause. She has changed, she is inspired by *my* strength” (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011).

The women reported feeling young in many ways, and at the same time they acknowledged that there were some physical changes that occurred. These changes were

not considered reason enough to think of midlife as a time of physical loss or decline, but just as different. One participant said,

I have learned that aging is just a number. I have learned that the same drive that I had as a younger adult is still the same. It might have diminished somewhat before I took on this challenge but it re-surfaced. I was re-kindled. The only thing that has changed that I've learned is that I have a few more limitations than I did when I was 20. Nothing to completely stop things but things are physically a little different, you just find a way to go around it, that's all. (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011)

Although the women were not concerned about being middle aged, they were concerned about losing mobility, fitness and mental sharpness. One woman wrote,

I'm feeling like I just don't have the same sharpness to my job that I used to have. I really hope it is not an age thing. On the news a study says exercise helps with Alzheimer's, well, today sure didn't feel that way. Things take me more time to think about, all I can say is I don't feel as sharp. (Heather, journal entry, December 14, 2010)

Midlife has predominantly been defined in the scientific literature and portrayed in western mainstream culture as a time of turmoil, decline and crisis. We learn from the six women's experience of midlife and of training for a marathon, that midlife is predominantly a positive experience and not a time of decline (see Appendix H for the list of descriptor words used to describe these experiences). One woman wrote,

I really don't think decline is happening. It's a myth of the media kind of thing. I can see there is some decline in that I'm not as fast or can't do things as well as

the youngsters but it's a manageable decline, it's acceptable, it's not defeating in any way. (Jessica, interview, January 10, 2011)

On the one hand Jessica dismissed the stereotype of midlife as a time of decline and then she referred to some decline but that it was not necessarily a negative issue. Other women in my study spoke to changes in their bodies in these same terms, as acknowledged changes that were not disabling, and that did not define that period in their lives. The struggle for midlife women to admit that there is decline could be attributed to hearing that midlife is a time of tremendous loss, and therefore admission of any downward change is avoided or rationalized by the women, in order that they do not have to accept society's definition of midlife as a time of loss and crisis.

However, the midlife phase was reported by the women in my study as a time not totally devoid of doubt, pain, and frustration. One woman experienced a considerable amount of doubt throughout her training but there was never any question in her mind that she would finish the race. Following are two excerpts from her journal. The first one was written at one of her lowest times and the second quote exemplifies confidence and courage. Both of these quotes represent the dichotomy of midlife, the triumphs and the challenges.

I'm so stupid. My back is in spasm. Drugs. I can't run today. Will I be able to run tomorrow? Is everything lost now? I don't even want to think about that right now. I'm very miserable. No matter what I do everything is coming out wrong. Should I just forget about this silly marathon thing and just get back to everything else. If you work every overtime hour you possibly can it still won't be enough money to make my husband happy but it will be enough hours to get out of this

hell house. Am I good enough at anything? I'm just useless. (Jessica, journal entry, December 14, 2010)

A short run today so I might as well make it faster and put a little incline with it. It's been such a stressful day. Ahhhh. I survived. I'm pleased with myself. In some respects I feel so strong from what I went through today, in others I feel weaker from the energy used. I've proved to myself I can do whatever is asked of my body or me. I'm strong. I'm ready. Bring it on. I made it. It's good. I can see myself finishing that marathon. It will happen. (Jessica, journal entry, March 20, 2011)

I return to points I made in Chapter 1: Introduction about Foucault's attention to power relations and the body. Women in my study did ask themselves "What is wrong with me?" when encountering sore or pulled muscles after running a 20 kilometre route or after an intense week of training. One participant doubted herself and her body during an appointment with a medical professional "I felt good going in and while I was there I lost some confidence in how I was feeling" (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011). The woman was told by a professional what was normal or not in regards to her back pain and this discourse affected, actually changed, how she felt about her own body.

The women in my study wrote extensively about pain to specific parts of their bodies and of the endurance that their bodies had that was a result of the experience of training for their first marathon. The participants came to understand their anatomical bodies and the limitations of them better through the pain they experienced. As noted above, the women in my study did turn to medical professionals on occasion to deal with



physical aches and pains and this did affect how and what they thought about their bodies.

If one were to accept the Foucauldian line of thought then the women in my study used their bodies by enduring the challenging training in order to avoid or dispel the social definitions of midlife and to create a slimmer body that made them feel better because a slim body is a valued body. It could be said that the women were self-regulating in order to reach their goals and were concerned about what others said. However, I take the six women in my study at their word when they stated that the goals they wanted to reach were not to create a new physical body, that this only became an outcome of their extensive training. I take the women at their word when they stated that the primary concern that they had about others was to accomplish their goal so as not to disappoint them, the women did not express a concern about what others thought their bodies should or should not look like. The women reported that the commitment to pursue the challenge was first and foremost to them, but most of the women also acknowledged that they did not want to disappoint particular people in their lives.

In the following three sections, I summarize the “textural” description, the structural description and the “essence” of participants’ experience of taking up marathon running during midlife. These terms are defined in Chapter 3, and they represent the phenomenological methodologist’s most refined interpretation of the meaning of an experience.

### **Textural Description: What Was Experienced**

The shared embodied experience of training for a first marathon at midlife by the six women in my study provided a story filled with a variety of challenges and triumphs.

The women in my study experienced something that they thought was unreachable, they thought running a marathon was something that only other people did. Subsequently, they experienced an increase in confidence. The women questioned their physical and mental abilities to run 42.2 kilometres. The women experienced initial feelings of doubt and guilt for doing something for themselves. The guilt faded as their confidence increased. “I am taking more time for myself and no one is begrudging me, as you know that can happen sometimes” (Sophia, interview, January 27, 2011). The women felt immense pride and accomplishment and often surprise with every milestone they reached.

For these women, training for a marathon involved an incredible amount of perseverance and purpose. They possessed a commitment to running that came to define their identity and became as important to their overall well-being as breathing is to living.

I don't worry about dying; I worry about being sick and elderly and not being able to have the physical capabilities to keep doing all the crazy things that I'm doing. Not being able to run, I worry about not being able to run. (Genevieve, interview, January 13, 2011)

The women experienced connection to running, themselves and others in their lives, and to new opportunities in life. The women enjoyed the act of running and experienced physical and psychological benefits from running. A phrase that was written more often than any other phrase by the women was “I'm so happy that I made myself do this today.” Heather spoke for all of them when she wrote in her journal, “I am glad I dragged my sorry butt off the couch and did it” (journal entry, January 23, 2011).

### **Structural Description: Influences on the Experience**

The setting played a particularly significant role in the women's experience. The women trained during one of Calgary's worst winters. The women faced ice, snow, wind, and temperatures below -20 degrees Celsius and as low as -30 degrees Celsius, throughout their training. They went on long, isolated runs in these conditions while family and friends stayed warm and dry and comfortable inside. Pushing through these environmental conditions added to the feelings of accomplishment and pride that the women experienced.

The women endured health, physical, career, and family strife throughout the experience. All of the women were challenged by personal injuries and one had a serious, unexpected, medical issue that required surgery. Some of the participants dealt with long workdays and one woman experienced work travel that kept her out of town for days at a time. Psychological issues for example, guilt, doubt, frustration, sadness, joy, pride, and excitement influenced the women's experience. Circumstances of life contributed to these feelings and all of the women experienced them to some degree.

### **Essence of the Experience**

The tremendous obstacles and challenges that the six women faced and overcame defined their experiences. Time and time again these women pushed themselves to run. They got up at 5 in the morning, they got off the couch when it was snowing and -30 degrees Celsius outside, they ran with sore knees, aching legs and backs, tight thighs and pounding heads, they ran after 4 hours of sleep, they ran while caring for sick family, they ran through the heartache of dying family and friends, and self-doubt, they ran on ice and into fierce winds, they ran in cramped work-out rooms in remote places where

work had taken them, they ran thirsty, hungry (“I’m so hungry I could eat a Volkswagen,” Jessica, journal entry, December 19, 2010), wet, cold and alone, and they literally picked themselves up after falling, and carried on running. The following journal entry emotes the physical and mental exhaustion that was experienced by all of the women: “All day at work I had visions of it all being over, that I screwed it all up. I’m so tired. I need to sleep. I need a day off from everything” (Jessica, journal entry, March 17, 2011).

Overcoming these challenges again and again gave the women confidence in their abilities and worth, and increased their understanding of others around them. The participants proved to themselves and to others in their lives that they had the capability and resolve to do more than they thought they could. They learned that other people in their lives were inspired by them and that midlife more than any other time in their lives allowed them the time, flexibility, and resources to consider and complete the challenge of training for their first marathon. The women acknowledged that they were worthy of the time taken for themselves and they gained newfound confidence that carried over into all aspects of their lives. One woman’s thoughts sums this up well:

I was telling someone how I hurt myself, but that it’s okay. And they asked do you think it’s worth it? Well it’s temporary. Of course I would do it again. I don’t know if you could even explain that, even though I hurt myself, yes I would do it again. I can see how logically that didn’t make sense. It’s like the old love and lost, you’ll love again. You’ll run again. (Jessica, interview, June 17, 2011)

For the six women in my study the experience of training for their first marathon at midlife involved perseverance and commitment that led to self-discovery and growth.

It was the extreme challenge and the subsequent pride, confidence and overall well-being that the women experienced that came to define their experience. This experience was not a passing phase in their lives but was a major life-changing event that redefined their identity in all aspects of their lives. The underlying meaning of the phenomenon of training for a first marathon at midlife is that of growth and rebirth in the face of adversity.

### **Summary of the Findings**

From the analysis of the women's journal entries and the narratives from the two interviews with each of the women, I presented a number of findings. There were many quotes from the women included in these findings. These were included to ensure that the women's voices were heard, and became part my interpretation of the description of their experience.

The findings identified three key themes, the capable self, connectivity and purpose. I addressed the two research questions about what the women learned holistically through the experience, and what we can learn about midlife in general from the women's experience. The findings were summarized in the "textural" description and the structural description. The "essence" of the experience is the final overall description of the phenomenon and the description is a composition of all of the findings outlined. This description represents the piece de resistance of phenomenology.

The findings revealed that training for a marathon at midlife by women is a positive experience with mental and physical benefits, and that the experience of midlife in general for women is primarily a time of optimism and satisfaction although not without the occasional "roller-coaster ride."

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter I provide an overview discussion of the purpose and findings of this research. Comparison of study findings and conclusions between my research and previous research identified in my literature review follows. Thoughts for future consideration of research and implications for midlife women and marathon running, the phase of midlife, exercise during midlife, and adult and embodied learning, close the chapter.

The primary purpose of this research was to discover the meaning that women gave to their embodied experience of training for their first marathon at midlife, in an effort to facilitate further understanding of what we know about the phase of midlife for women. The six women, aged 43 to 57 years, who participated in my study, shared their stories through heartfelt journal entries written over an eight-month period, as well as narrative from two semi-structured interviews.

The experience was found to be a positive experience for the women who reported physical and psychological benefits while training for their first marathon. The women's identities evolved as their priorities shifted and they focused on engaging in new activities and doing something for themselves. The increased confidence they gained as a result of the benefits and accomplishments they experienced through their physically and mentally challenging training, led to new relationships and opportunities in their personal and professional lives. Training for a marathon at midlife provided the women with stress relief, or "cheap therapy," to endure life challenges faced at midlife. A strong sense of connection was developed as a result of their new identity as runners and members of a community with shared interests. The women came to realize the strength

and importance of their support systems. The women learned the importance of setting and meeting goals through their persistence and subsequent accomplishments. The women overcame extreme challenges, physically and mentally, during their pursuit of running a marathon. The embodied experience of the women supported the notion that learning is a holistic experience involving both the mind and the body, and one's environment, that leads to growth and transformation. Finally, the women came to love running purely for the sake of running, and it became an integral part of their lives.

My study also investigated what we can learn about the midlife phase for women. The findings suggested that midlife is primarily a positive phase in a woman's life, that it is a period of transition and growth. It is a time of hopefulness, confidence, flexibility, calmness and laughter. Midlife is also a time when there is some urgency to learn and accomplish more. Midlife includes periods of frustration and confusion over physical and psychological changes that are experienced by women. Inconsistencies with how midlife is defined in the literature and mainstream culture versus how it is experienced by women play key roles in the confusion that midlife women feel.

The findings of my study revealed the overall midlife experience in general is positive and that training for a marathon during midlife is described as a more positive experience than midlife in general (see Appendix G). Overwhelmingly, the midlife women felt grateful and satisfied, and they felt excited, strong and inspired by their marathon training experience. Following, I discuss my findings in relation to some particular themes.

### **Midlife Women, Marathon Training, and Exercise**

The findings of my study support the abundant research conclusions that regular exercise, specifically marathon training, has significant positive implications for physical and psychological well-being, particularly for midlife women who are experiencing transitions in their life. Study findings previously noted by Stocker (2009) and Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) revealed these benefits experienced by the participants who engaged in long distance running. The results from my study support these findings that women express overall positive well-being associated with physical exercise, specifically running. One woman said “Running is a big part of my life now. It has totally changed me to the point of being more confident and knowing that I can get through some pretty difficult things” (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011). Physical activity has been substantially proven to be one of the factors leading to a more positive midlife experience by women.

The women in my study were asked to provide words that described both their midlife experience in general and the experience of training for a marathon at midlife. My interpretation of the words the women used to describe midlife in general was 65% positive (i.e., wisdom, hopeful, accomplished, grateful, awareness) and 35% negative (i.e., confusing, inconsistent, physical decline). For words used to describe their experience of training for a marathon at midlife, I deemed 85% positive (i.e., fulfilling, strong, growth, motivating, confidence) and 15% negative (i.e., physically painful, challenging) (see Appendix G). The higher percentage of positive descriptors for the marathon experience can be partially attributed to the benefits of physical exercise because of the numerous references the women made to the benefits of running. One



woman reported that the same drive she had as a younger adult might have diminished somewhat but that it re-surfaced when she took on the marathon challenge.

Majcen (2007) looked at the benefits of a marathon training program for midlife women and the findings showed that women experienced increased confidence, were better able to cope with stress, saw themselves as role models, were committed to themselves, learned the importance of connection and setting goals, and gained a sense of control over their lives. My research shared these findings.

Research by Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) focused on mental changes that occurred during long distance running and found that the women experienced an emotional change in connection with running. The researchers looked at how the change affected every aspect of the women's lives after the exercise ended. The women experienced clarity about who they were and what they wanted. The women in this study and in my study learned that they were strong and healthy and capable of pushing themselves, and that they wanted to work less.

There were some notable similarities of themes between the Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) results and the results from my study, these being empowerment, confidence, connection and support. Women in both studies experienced new levels of risk taking and increased confidence in their running and physical ability but also in relation to their careers and personal relationships. One woman from my study said, "I'm surprised how the whole experience just flows over into your life" (Genevieve, interview, May 30, 2011). Additionally, the experience of long distance running which translated into individual achievement, nurtured a sense of community and connection for the women. The women in both studies identified a new respect for dissimilar viewpoints and

behaviours of others that did not align with their own. Finally, self-connection and self-discovery were key defining factors in the Boudreau and Giorgi study, and similar findings were found in my research.

Women in the Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) study were devoid of depression and they found that the training helped them overcome challenges within their personal and professional lives. In my study one participant noted that the training experience was “cheap therapy” and that she didn’t know how she and her family would have survived the hardships they endured during her training without the shared goal of running a marathon. She said,

If I weren’t doing this running I would have tendencies to fall into depression.

This is really helping me to stay together mentally this year, my family and I needed some glimmer of hope and this was it. It was a good thing to happen in the middle of all of this. (Heather, interview, June 16, 2011)

An outcome of long distance running found by Majcen (2007), Boudreau and Giorgi (2010), and my research, is that the women experienced a belief in their capability to successfully perform a task. A common phrase from all of the women was “I can do it, I can do anything.” The heightened confidence in their own abilities that was experienced by all of the women during their marathon training, was a key theme found in these studies.

Unlike the women in Majcen’s (2007) study, the women in my study did not give their body weight tremendous importance throughout the training. Less than half of the women in my study made reference to their body weight, specifically about losing weight and being happy with that outcome. None of the women set losing weight as a goal for

pursuing long distance running. Some of the women in my study mentioned weight loss as a welcome outcome of the training although the study did not focus on changes that occurred in the body. On three occasions one woman recorded in her journal the amount of weight that she had lost to that point in her training. She noted with each of the entries that her weight loss would have positive benefits for her knees and joints. The women in my study stressed the importance of physical activity and being fit and that running had become a necessary part of their healthy life. For example, Jessica wrote in her journal, "I'm middle aged; I want to be strong. If I'm strong it is likely that I will continue to be healthy" (journal entry, January 17, 2011).

The possibility that body weight was a measurement recorded during the specific training program in Majcen's (2007) study is a plausible explanation for the focus on body weight by the women in that study. The age of the women could be another factor contributing to women's attitudes about weight loss and motivation for running a marathon. A study with fitness instructors 50 years of age and older, found similar results as my study, that the older midlife women became, the less of an issue body shape was (Poole, 2001).

Study findings have identified that midlife women who train for a marathon were challenged to do something that they had never done before. It was very important for the women in my study to persevere and meet the goals that they had set, even as challenging as they were. This was the case of the Boudreau and Giorgi (2010), and Majcen (2007) findings. Both of these studies involved a defined running program as part of the study, unlike my study that did not incorporate a formal training regime as part of the study. This difference did not influence the determination or perseverance of the women to meet

their challenge. Majcen suggested that one way to promote physical activity in midlife women is through challenge. This is an important observation because although the benefits of exercise are well documented, midlife women are underrepresented participants in regular physical activity.

Important findings from a study that analyzed what the women, aged 50 years and older, perceived to be the benefits of regular exercise, provided insight into the issue of low physical exercise participation by midlife women (Poole, 2001). The researchers investigated whether midlife women's commitment to exercise reflected their desire to shape and manage their bodies to fight the effects of aging, or whether it was about empowerment. Health and the associated "feel good" factor of running were the most often-cited reasons for exercising. Findings from my study support the desire to be healthy as a commonly reported benefit of exercise and motivation for taking on the challenge of running a marathon. The "feel good" factor and overall well-being were also identified as meaningful to the women in my study. They were concerned more about staying healthy and avoiding illness rather than with youthful physical appearance. One woman said,

I'm healthy and I'm well but I don't have a concern about what I look like, I'm more concerned about being strong and being fit. I want to be mobile, I want to be strong, I don't care what colour my hair is, I don't care if I have wrinkles or if for some reason my eyebrows are fading. (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011)

The women in my study acknowledged the cultural messages of the value of youth, and the connection of youth and physical activity. One woman encountered a situation while buying running shoes. The young man helping her assumed that she

wanted “old lady walking shoes.” The woman found the experience amusing and somewhat annoying and noted that retailers could be missing the boat by ignoring or being unaware of the fact that many midlife women are indeed physically active. This relates to the perceptions in western culture of both midlife women in general and midlife women and exercise, and to the definitions of who can and cannot, or does or does not, participate in marathon running. I address this below with two examples from my study.

One woman in my study did not believe that she could ever run a marathon even though her husband had run one. For over 25 years he asked her again and again to travel and do marathons with him. Her response was always “I can’t do that.” She said that was until she saw the information on my research that showed that midlife women do run marathons and as she said, “all of a sudden my world changed” (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011). Genevieve agreed, “When I saw it on television and I saw you on television I thought, Oh you know, she looks just like me. I think it would have been different if you were ... if you weren’t middle aged yourself” (interview, January 13, 2011). Another woman in my study expressed this uncertainty and wrote, “I am officially bummed out, maybe I need to admit that I am old” and “I really doubt if I can make the whole marathon, maybe I am too old for this” (Heather, journal entry, December 28, 2010).

Returning to findings discussed in Chapter 2, Hendry et al. (2010) researched barriers to, and facilitators of, participation in physical exercise by midlife women. Once the women experienced a change in attitude about what constituted exercise, their participation in, and openness to new activities increased. The results of my study support these findings, and confirm Hendy et al.’s conclusions that social discourse, beliefs about

oneself, and knowledge and support can have an affect on women's views surrounding physical activity. The attitude change that the women experienced was accompanied by a sense of ownership of meeting a physically challenging goal.

The women in my study reported that they did in fact feel younger during their experience of training for a marathon. One woman said, "In some ways I still think I am 22 and can do anything. The drive I had as a younger person is still the same, age is just a number" (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011). The women were able to train with, and keep up with, younger runners. At the same time the women were conscious of aches and pains that they deemed to be age-related. For example one woman noted, "With middle age I find minor aches and pains sometimes can be construed differently than they would have been 15 or 20 years ago" (Dorothy, interview, January 7, 2011). The final comparison with Poole's (2001) research relates to the benefits of social interaction and the support of others. The women in Poole's study reported that the benefits of support that they received were a major factor that contributed to their commitment to exercise. These findings support the findings in my study that identified the importance of connection.

The results of a quantitative study with 399 women aged 50 to 60 years indicated a need for better understanding of exercise behaviour in order to promote regular physical exercise in older women (Netz et al. 2008). The researchers measured whether physical activity levels and patterns over a four-year period were associated with well-being. They found that some women experienced the positive emotions associated with exercise, and others did not, and that this could be attributed to physiology. All of the women in my study identified overall well-being as a benefit of their running.

## Midlife

Often cited researcher, Lippert (1997), reviewed the research on theories of women's development and identified the complexity of midlife. The interaction of individual, biological, sociocultural and environmental influences contribute to the complicated nature of midlife for women.

Studies suggest that attitudes toward midlife are influenced by the place in time that women experience midlife. Research noted in Chapter 2 identified findings by Paff Ogle and Damhorst (2005), Henderson and Ainsworth (2001), and McGowan and Smith (2010) that suggested midlife baby boomers experienced a different midlife than previous generations did. The women in my study are from the same cohort as the women from these studies and expressed similar feelings and experiences. One woman wrote,

I think maybe our era is more aware of things. We have different ideas now. It's not just cooking and cleaning and being there for your kids. Everyone is an individual still and there is still a lot to do at midlife. (Sophia, interview, January 27, 2011)

A survey of 1037 midlife women also addressed the cohort issue while investigating attitudes, specifically, regret versus relief, toward menopause (Strauss, 2009). The study investigated the function that multiple roles played on the midlife experience. The researcher suggested that baby boomer women might experience menopause, and midlife in general, differently than earlier generations as a result of having multiple roles and being part of what is referred to as the sandwich generation. This implies having children and parents under one's care at the same time. One woman in my study was particularly affected by having to care for her ill, aging parents.

Additionally, the woman and her mother had very different attitudes toward midlife. An interesting finding was that the mother's attitude toward midlife and menopause shifted to a more positive light as she watched her daughter benefit from the experience of training for a marathon.

Past research (Banister, 2000) revealed that emotional difficulties that are experienced by midlife women are complex, and need to be considered within the context of other personal and professional life events. In her study with 11 women aged 40 to 53 years, Banister found that the women expressed a sense of confusion and uncertainty about their midlife phase. For example, the women made reference to seeing themselves in the mirror and being surprised by the image that they saw. This same reference to surprise at one's image in a mirror was reported by Perz and Ussher (2008), as well as by one woman in my study. The women noted feeling younger than the reflection that they saw in the mirror.

Previous studies have found that midlife women who report feeling younger than their chronological age, reported higher wellness (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). My research and the studies noted in the previous paragraph, support these findings. Being surprised by their reflections in the mirror suggested that the women felt younger than their actual years of life. What this means to the overall midlife experience for women, and if there is a relationship with women who participate in endurance exercise remains to be determined.

Literature and cultural messages suggest a need by midlife women to maintain a youthful image; however, the women in my study did not support the findings. They did not express a need to have or regain a youthful physical appearance. The overall findings



by Degges-White and Myers support other research that youth and health are associated with satisfaction with life, and that the midlife women in their study who engaged in health promoting activities reported greater life satisfaction than those who did not engage in activity.

One of the major themes identified in a recent study was that all of the midlife women participants defined midlife as positive; that they felt good about themselves and that they were looking forward to the next phase (Perz & Ussher, 2008). The researchers interviewed 22 midlife women with a focus on menopause. The women reported increased self-confidence, time for themselves, self-awareness and self-worth. The women felt empowerment as a result of valuing their own opinion, rather than in the past when they attempted to please others. The findings from my research are in alignment and reported that midlife was a positive time when women felt hopeful about their future. Additionally, both studies reported that the women were still involved in family life, but it was no longer the center of their world.

The women in the Perz and Ussher (2008) study spoke about passing time with some sadness and loss, but the majority of the women expressed an acceptance of time gone by, and acknowledged the wisdom they had gained from life experience. These findings support the urgency that the women in my study reported. In both studies, midlife was defined as a time to take note of the time left in life, to embrace the new experiences yet to come, but not to dwell on time that had passed.

A finding consistent with other research, including my study, found that women viewed taking care of health as a priority in midlife. Poole (2001) found that the most common motivators for exercising were health and feeling good. These were also

common motivators for the women in my study. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, the women in my study did not support Foucault's assertion that women's bodies are something to control and improve in order to attain a desired bodily appearance, this was not a source of motivation for the women. All of the women in my study noticed changes in their bodies during the training. The changes most noted were weight loss, and gains in strength and energy. The women described these changes in their bodies as positive. All of the women indicated that although they were pleased with the changes in their bodies, such changes were not initial motivators for pursuing running a marathon, nor were they early considerations as outcomes of the experience.

The women in my study placed heavy demands on their bodies to reach the goals they had set, most notably to be healthy and to do something they said they would do. The ultimate goal, in terms of their bodies, of training for a marathon at midlife for the women in my study was to do all that they could to ensure lifelong health and a well functioning body. The women feared injury to their bodies that would keep them from running. The women wanted to take measures to maintain their health and avoid illness that they were seeing in others around them. The women's experience is in alignment with the notion that humans are susceptible to illness and the subsequent changes to the aging body and at the same time people are being encouraged to take measures that can stop or delay the aging process (Moore, 2010). It can be argued that through exercising their bodies, and learning to "listen" to their bodies through the embodied experience of training for a marathon, the midlife women in my study experienced health benefits.

The negative health symptoms of menopause were not found to be problematic to the majority of the women studied by researchers Perz & Ussher (2008). Findings from

my study support this. Women from both studies also reported that exercise and diet combated any negative symptoms associated with menopause and their changing bodies, and led to increased confidence and overall well-being. Perz and Ussher reported that the women noted increased risk taking that was a result of their newfound confidence. The women in my study expressed similar experiences and reported feelings of accomplishment and hopefulness for the future. They defined midlife as a positive time of change and transition and of having the flexibility and time to take risks and take more time for themselves. One woman in my study described the meaning of midlife as being very confident, finding yourself, and being the best you can be.

### **Embodied Learning**

Boudreau and Giorgi's (2010) study focused on trail running and found that midlife women had an enhanced connection to nature while running. Women in Majcen's (2007) study also reported that they connected with nature while running and that running was a time for introspection and a mindfulness-like state of being in the moment. Although my research focused on women training for road marathons, I found that when the women ran on park trails or on tropical beaches they described an enhanced connection to nature. One woman wrote, "You all of a sudden realize you are in Fish Creek and my gosh there are all sorts of different birds that you can hear, and then the deer come out on the path. It's moments like that that I love about running" (Heather, journal entry, January 16, 2011).

In his research on scuba diving, Straughan (2010) focused on the importance of an embodied engagement with the environment, in a natural setting, and the ability for this to promote a sense of well-being. My study has extended the findings by Straughan

relating to scuba diving to women participating in long distance running. One woman described, on more than one occasion, a feeling of calmness and well-being after encountering deer on a trail, on a snowy afternoon, while on her run. Connecting with the environment and focusing on breath allowed for the scuba divers and the women in my study to reflect and turn more inward, creating calmness and overall feelings of well-being.

The participants in my study initially expressed difficulty understanding the concept of embodied learning. The women soon came to realize that what they were experiencing was embodied learning, and that embodied learning is important. The women were able to talk about their embodied experience as their training progressed because of increased body awareness and understanding of the concept. They wrote about connecting with the environment while running outdoors, of memories created from smells, of understanding their body more and pushing it knowing that it would respond, or conversely, of learning to know when to rest. Some of the time the women were able to shut off their brain and just be in the moment and enjoy the run. One participant's experience exemplifies the importance of bodily knowing and she wrote,

Beyond the halfway point I was becoming tired and feeling like I was physically challenged. Body tight, chin tucked down, feet thump thump thump. Then my brain switched on for a brief moment and I recalled an article I had read some time ago in Runner's World magazine that suggested "staying tall," "looking ahead," "stepping lightly," "holding your stomach in," and "elongating your step." One at a time I invoked these physical changes and within a few minutes I was feeling much lighter on my feet, breathing much easier, and prepared to

complete my run. I didn't learn that standing tall would make breathing easier for a tired body, I already knew that. What I did learn is that I have to check in with my body when I'm running. (Genevieve, journal entry, January 15, 2011)

Genevieve realized that she already knew the techniques but what she did learn was that she needed to "check in with her body" and invoke the physical changes her body was telling her she needed. Clarke (2001) would agree that her body led the way, that her body was the original site of knowledge.

Previous research also found that the participants had initial difficulty describing embodied learning as a concept (Freiler, 2008). After engaging in tai chi and yoga, as well as other visualization techniques as part of the study, the women were better able to understand and verbalize not only the concept of embodiment, but they described experiences of embodied learning that took place. The participants in the study, like the women in my study, reported "being in tune" with their bodies, listening to the body, "I sat down and cried, and I learned to listen to that, I learned to listen to my body" (Genevieve, journal entry, February 23, 2011), and being more aware of the body experience and their environment, "The sun was setting, the wind picked up and was in my face" (Sophia, journal entry, January 4, 2011). The Freiler study participants and the women in my study came to better understand the body as a site for learning. As Heather noted in her journal after a running, "I used this run to try to really tune into my body" (Heather, journal entry, January 25, 2011). Another woman in my study was able to write about embodied learning after months of training:

The body knows things and it tells you. You have to be open to listen to it, absolutely. There is nothing that is happening to you mentally that the body hasn't

already told you about. It's a learned thing, to learn to listen and not just let the mind rule. (Jessica, journal entry, March 15, 2011)

It is worth noting Somerville's (2004) research with mine workers in Australia. The findings of this study and my study support the credence of embodied learning. As one woman in my study said during her second interview,

I've read a lot of books on running, chi running, nutrition, and I've trained and run long distances and I really think that experiencing the sport would be a good experience if you are going to teach it, this I mean for coaches, trainers, and nutritionists. You need the body awareness in order to understand and share the knowledge. (Sue, May 31, 2011)

Somerville's experience of going down a coal mine gave her a body knowledge that allowed her to understand the miner's experiences of working underground. It was not until she immersed her body in the mine that Somerville gained credibility with the participants, and a full understanding of the experience. These examples support the importance of the body as a site of learning.

Training for and completing a 42.2 kilometre run involves bodily knowing and mind-body unity. Running became an important part of the lives of the women in my study and the description of the embodied experience of running became a part of the experience of midlife. As one researcher explained this holistic thinking, "Our bodies don't exist to carry our heads around. Any thinking has the whole body participating" (Palombo Weiss, 2001, p. 62). Kwant's (1966) analogy of the mind and body is helpful in understanding this relatedness. Kwant describes the mind and body as two sides of a

piece of paper. Each side of the paper can be described but the two sides of paper cannot be separated.

The final comparison relating to embodied learning and marathon running is with previous research by Boudreau and Giorgi (2010). The researchers confirmed that midlife women did learn about themselves, others in their lives, and the world around them through the embodied experience of training for a marathon, as did the women in my study.

The final section in this chapter reviews considerations for further research and teaching and learning opportunities that might add to our understanding of the experience of midlife for women and physical exercise at midlife. There is an emphasis on further study, and the implications of, the benefits of challenging oneself physically and psychologically through the embodied experience of training for a marathon at midlife.

### **Future Considerations**

“Women have been viewed as ‘uninteresting’ to study because of the predictability of their lives” (Lippert, 1997, p. 19). This lack of understanding of the midlife phase for women has been dispelled by more recent research that identifies this time in a woman’s life as anything but predictable, but rather as a predominantly positive time of growth and transition, while not devoid of frustration and inconsistencies.

Future qualitative research, with the purpose of listening to women’s lived experiences, will provide continued insight into this phase of a woman’s life. Research on aging has predominantly had a biological focus, therefore further qualitative insight will serve to provide information that will benefit midlife women physically, mentally and

emotionally, and could reduce the often negatively portrayed image of midlife in the mainstream culture. Additionally, further research that includes women from more varied backgrounds and cultures than the predominance of research with Caucasian, middle-classed, married women, will benefit understanding the complexities of midlife.

An extension of my research could further examine the benefits of endurance running on overall well-being and the role physical activity plays in the challenges that women overcome both mentally and physically during midlife. My research adds to previous research that is definitive in that extreme exercise has a positive effect on the lives of midlife women, both physically and psychologically.

Further research that identifies midlife women as active and capable of running a marathon will help to dispel the western mainstream belief, as reflected in popular literature, on television and on magazine covers, that youth still rules in long distance running. Further investigation and positive findings will help motivate midlife women to engage in long distance running, or any form of exercise on a regular basis. The proven potential of marathon training contributing to the well-being of midlife women is worthy of further research with an emphasis on efforts to determine the factors that will encourage more women to engage in physical activity during midlife.

Although previous research and my study have identified that midlife women indicated health as a primary reason for taking up the challenge of training for a marathon, it is the overall sense of well-being that the women referred to again and again throughout the experience. This feeling of well-being has been found to lead to success in maintaining physical activity. Implications of this suggest that health professionals, aging



agencies, fitness clubs, and running coaches, need to consider appealing to midlife women by promoting participation in long distance running as a way of increasing their quality of life rather than as a way of avoiding physical and health decline (Segar, 2006).

Another extension of this research could support the theory of holistic learning and the importance of the body as a source of knowledge. The women in my study came to understand the concept of embodied learning and came to view their body as part of how they learned. These findings have implications for how adults learn and for teaching adult learners, and are worthy of future consideration for incorporating in learning environments.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

Study Participants  
Needed

Graduate Programs in Education



The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of women who run their first marathon at mid-life. What and how women learn about themselves, the world around them, and the mid-life experience are explored.

Patricia Knutson is conducting this study for MA thesis-related research in the Faculty of Education under the supervision of Dr. Kaela Jubas, Assistant Professor.

- \* Are you a woman between 45 - 60 years of age?
- \* Are you training for your first marathon?
- \* Are you interested in journaling and talking about your experiences?
- \* For further details or to participate please contact Patricia Knutson at [knutson@ucalgary.ca](mailto:knutson@ucalgary.ca) or phone [REDACTED]

This study has been assigned Ethics File 6568

Contact

[knutson@ucalgary.ca](mailto:knutson@ucalgary.ca)

[knutson@ucalgary.ca](mailto:knutson@ucalgary.ca)

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## Appendix B: UToday Article

### Running

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**UToday** October 22, 2010

### Going the distance

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*By Betty Rice*

When you think of a marathoner, what do you picture? A man or woman in their 20s or 30s, trim and healthy, jogging effortlessly down a path? That wouldn't be surprising, as most publications in which runners are featured focus on people in this group. But is it realistic, and how do those images affect others who might take up running as a life-changing sport?

Patricia Knutson wants to challenge a different group than the one described above to lace up their runners and give marathons a shot. Knutson, a graduate student in the Faculty of Education, is looking for volunteers who want to train for distance running and journal the experience. Newcomers to the sport are welcome, and established runners can join too—the only three criteria are that her participants are middle-aged (45-65), female, and that they haven't yet completed a marathon.

"We are told, mid-life is time of loss and crisis," Knutson explains. "We are told that, physically, our bodies begin to slow down, that we become asexual and less attractive, and that we lose our sharp edge intellectually. If we have children, we experience the empty nest syndrome...Are these portrayals the reality of the mid-life experience in western culture? I don't know if that's true, and that's what I want to find out."

Knutson, a self-described middle-aged runner herself, understands the benefits of physical fitness, and wants to observe the process as female baby boomers take up the challenge to train for their goal to run a marathon. "What can we learn about the meaning of mid-life by listening to women's descriptions of their experiences?"

Knutson hopes that the study will add to the growing body of positive literature about gender, aging, identity and informal learning, specifically embodied learning. Study participants will have an opportunity to better understand themselves, the mid-life experience, others in their lives and the world around them.

Knutson needs 10-12 women in order to carry out her research. If you are interested and fit into the criteria for her group, contact her at [Knutson@ucalgary.ca](mailto:Knutson@ucalgary.ca) or call her at [REDACTED]



## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Patricia Knutson, Researcher  
 Student of Graduate Programs in Education, University of Calgary  
 [REDACTED] / knutson@ucalgary.ca

**Supervisor:**

Kaela Jubas, Assistant Professor  
 Graduate Programs in Education, University of Calgary  
 (403) 210-3921 / kjubas@ucalgary.ca

**Title of Project:**

What it Means to be a Woman at  
 Mid-life: First-time Marathoners and Embodied Learning

---

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study:**

This study is being conducted as part of the requirements of a Master's of Arts degree specializing in adult learning. The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of women who run their first marathon at mid-life. What and how women learn about themselves, the world around them and the mid-life experience are explored. You have been invited to participate because you meet the criteria of gender, age and being a first time marathon runner at mid-life.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

As a participant in this study you will be expected to keep a journal throughout your training process. The anticipated period for journal keeping is three to six months. It is expected that you will record entries at least two times per week. You are asked to reflect on your daily experiences while training for your marathon. Journal entries can be in the form of narrative text, poetry, or art form such as drawing. Questions to consider for example are; how did you feel before running? How did you feel after running? Were there challenges or obstacles before taking the first steps? What did you think about while running? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others? What did you learn about the world around you? What were you aware of while running? How was the overall experience of running? What support do you or not receive from family or friends? Was the learning experience

similar to other learning experiences? How? How was it different? Did you feel connected to your body and senses? What did you learn from that connection? Can you describe how that embodied learning took place? You are required to provide your own journal (of choice).

You will also be asked to complete a one-on-one interview that will last no longer than one hour. The purpose of the interview is for data gathering in order (along with the journal entries) to obtain a rich and descriptive essence of women at mid-life participating in long distance running and what and how learning occurs. The interview will take place one to two months after beginning the study. The interview will be digitally audio recorded.

You will be invited to review your data and the overall meaning analyzed by the researcher prior to inclusion in the final report. You will be given two weeks after receiving the information to respond with any changes. No response within this timeframe will indicate approval of the material. Information exchange will be through email and/or telephone contact.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Should you choose to withdraw part way through the study, journal entries and information from the interview collected up to that point would be retained by the researcher for possible use. However, if it is your wish not to have your data included in the study it will not be used and original journals will be returned to you. Original journals will be returned to participants completing the study within three years after study completion. An opportunity for individual participant follow-up meetings will be provided after study completion.

#### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Participant gender and age are required information for the study. Neither participants' real names nor explicitly identifying information (unusual details about personal, family and/or work circumstances and unique physical identifiers) will be used in any reports or presentations related to this study. In order to protect anonymity you will be assigned a pseudonym by the researcher. Any and all references to your data, including direct quotes, will be cited with your pseudonym.

#### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There are no known or anticipated risks and / or discomforts associated with the study. The expected benefits associated with participation are the opportunity for meaning making about oneself and one's world, the opportunity to appreciate the value of lifelong learning and the opportunity to participate in a qualitative research study anticipated to contribute to the positive literature about midlife women and adult learning.

#### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. Data collected up to the point of withdrawal will be returned to you if requested, otherwise the data will be retained for possible use in this study and future research and returned after a three-year period.



No one except the researcher and her supervisor will be allowed to see or hear the interview communication or journal reflections. Only the researcher and her supervisor will know the names of participants and their corresponding data. Group or individual information to be summarized for any presentation or publication of results will be anonymous. The data (journals, transcriptions, audio tapes) will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher. All electronic data will be password protected and/or encrypted and will be destroyed after three years. All paper data, audio recordings and transcriptions will be shredded and/or destroyed after three years.

**Signatures (written consent)**

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Patricia Knutson, Researcher  
Student of Graduate Programs in Education, University of Calgary  
knutson@ucalgary.ca  
And Kaela Jubas, Assistant Professor  
Graduate Programs in Education, University of Calgary  
(403) 210-3921 / kjubas@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email [rburrows@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rburrows@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## **Appendix D: Interview 1 Schedule**

The purpose of this interview is to gather personal information, reflections about your mid-life experience in general, the experience of training for a marathon and the process and learning outcomes you are experiencing – what and how learning takes place. The interview will be digitally audio-recorded to aid in its transcription (with your permission). You have the option of declining to respond to a question. It will take approximately 40 – 60 minutes to go through the questions.

### **Questions**

1. Let's start with some personal information questions:
  - What is your date of birth?
  - How would you describe your racial/ethnic/cultural background?
  - What level of formal education have you completed and/or are currently enrolled in?
  - How would you describe your current employment and family status? Have there been any recent changes for you in these areas?
  - What is your household income?
  
2. Tell me about your typical day/week (work, family, friends, activity, community involvement, household tasks, how you feel emotionally and physically, what do you like to do, who do you spend time with, what do you think about, things you learn, what is your outlook on life, how do you feel about the roles you play, is there overlap in your roles)
  
3. Let's talk about the marathon training experience
  - What led you to train for a marathon at this time in your life?
  - What kind of support do you receive (from family, friends, co-workers)?
  - How has this learning experience been different from other learning experiences? Similarities?
  - Has there been a connection with your body, mind and senses?
  - Can you describe that?
  - Has learning come out of this connectedness? How?
  - What learning and or growth is taking place that would otherwise not be?
  - Has learning occurred with those supporting your training?
  
4. What images of mid-life do you see, hear or read about? Is there a specific example of this that you would like to share?
  
5. What words or images would you use to describe your mid-life experience? Again, can you think of a specific example?
  
7. Do you have further comments or questions?



### **Appendix E: Interview 2 Schedule**

Thank you for your time and efforts in journaling your experience and for this interview.

The purpose of this interview is to gather thoughts about your experience of training for, and completing your first marathon, since our first interview in January.

We will go through the questions and please note that you are not obliged to answer any questions. The interview will be digitally audio-recorded to aid in its transcription (with your permission. I will be taking notes while we speak. Please feel free to contact me with further comments should you have any after the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What did you learn (about yourself, midlife, others)?
2. Five words to describe your experience since we last spoke.
3. Physicality has been viewed as something that must be restrained or controlled to achieve cognitive accomplishment. Embodied learning is a holistic view of knowledge construction with the body and the site of learning where thoughts are influenced by our bodies and vice versa. Can you speak to the issue of embodied learning
4. Please describe the marathon race experience (5 words).
5. What motivated you to finish the training?
6. What motivated you to finish the race?
7. What were the biggest obstacles/challenges in meeting this goal
8. What factors contributed to your success in meeting this goal?
9. How has this experience changed you?
10. How has this experience changed others in your life?
11. Would you recommend this experience to others? Reasons?
12. Other thoughts? Comments?

### Appendix F: Initial Themes and Words and Phrases

Initial Themes that Emerged	High Frequency Words, Statements, and Phrases
Aging	I did it!
Benefits	Someone asked me if I was ever going to quit. No, I was going to crawl if I had to.
Commitment	This is about me.
Confidence	I learned that I could do what I set my mind to.
Doubt	Aging is just a number.
Family	I'm strong and I'm determined.
Goals	I've had a lot of support and that was huge.
Good days/Bad days	Sore hips, sore back, sore knees, what have I done? Keep going it will feel better soon.
Guilt	But I persevered.
Humour	I was so happy that I ran today.
Intimidation	This was a good run. I felt good.
Joy	I'm so happy that I accomplished my goal.
Learning	Friends and family have told me that I inspire them.
Perseverance	I will meet my goal.
Physical Aches and Pains	I am feeling great about how far I have come and how focused I am.
Pride	Midlife is a positive place to be. I feel happy and I feel lucky.
Risk-taking	It never crossed my mind not to finish.
Shock	I'm surprised how the whole experience just flows over into your life.
Support	I love to run.
Work	I'm struggling. I'm tired.

### Appendix G: Words Women Used to Describe Their Experiences

<u>Midlife in General</u>	<u>Marathon Training Experience</u>
Frustrating	Clarity
Wonderful	Body Change
Memory loss	Stability / Balanced
Body Changes / Out of Shape	Youthful
Teaching / Learning	Healthy
Knowledge / Experience / Wisdom	Grateful / Fortunate / Privileged
Awareness of Health and Mortality	Invigorated / Energized
Grateful / Lucky	Obsessed (in a good way)
Guilt	Hopeful
Positive	Connections
Challenging	Physically Painful
Optimistic / Hopeful	Quest / Challenge
Confidence	Challenging / Hard Work
Flexibility	Exciting
Accomplished	Newness
Younger (than parents were at midlife)	Apprehensive / Fear (of not running)
Urgency	Self Awareness
Confusing / Erratic / Roller Coaster	Physically Fit / Athletic / Strong
Self Awareness	Self Improvement
Scary	Confidence / Powerful
Surprising	Positive / Uplifting / Motivating
Irritating	Purposeful / Goals
Peaceful / Calm	Satisfaction
Risk Taking	Learning
Laughter	Selfish / Guilt
Rising / Coming Together	Inspiring
	Determined
	Fun
	Lonely
	Proud
	Surprised

*Note.* Highlighted words were those deemed positive

- Midlife experience in general – 62% positive, 38% negative
- Marathon training experience – 84% positive, 16% negative

## Appendix H: Journaling Guidelines

Phenomenology is the research method being used for this study. Phenomenology seeks to understand lived experiences from the descriptions of those living the experience. In this study an understanding of the experience of mid-life women training for their first marathon is sought. Your journal entries will be one of the two sources of information for the research. Analysis of your writings by the researcher will develop themes and overall universals of the experience.

Please write as freely and expressively as you'd like and make every effort to write at least two times per week. What you write about will vary and change depending on where you are at with your training and as you progress through the training. There are no restrictions on the length or format (narrative text, poetry, drawings) of the daily entries. Photographs cannot be included. Typed computer entries are acceptable and can be forwarded as email attachments. Entries will be collected 2 or 3 times throughout the research period.

Questions to consider (but not limited to) for example are; how did you feel before running? How did you feel after running? What planning was involved in running today? What did you think about while running? What are you learning about yourself? What are you learning about others? What are you learning about the world around you? What are you learning about midlife? What were you aware of while running? What senses were you in tune with or aware of while running? Did you experience a mind/body connection? How did you learn from that connectedness? What impact did the physical training have on your emotions, your intellectual ability, your attitudes, your confidence and your overall well-being? What support do you or not receive from family or friends?

Enjoy!



**Appendix I: Visual Representation of Data Analysis**