

Acknowledgement: A Way Toward Spiritual Communication

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Acknowledgement is a communicative act through which we confirm, affirm, or validate another (Hyde 2006). This paper is an autoethnographic account of my experiences in conducting a personal experiment in which I wrote letters to students, friends, colleagues, family, and even strangers in order to acknowledge them for the difference that they make to me and to others. I suggest, based on published literature and my own experiences, that acknowledgement is a spiritual act, and that by acknowledging others, we recognize the interconnectedness of our lives to those of others. I also argue that acknowledgement is an evolved form of gratitude, and offers a more sophisticated means of communication which focuses on equality and wholeness rather than hierarchy and ranking. The paper concludes with the experienced benefits of an acknowledgement practice, together with how future iterations of the project will be changed.

1 Introduction

When I was in the first grade, a friend quietly handed me a book that he had finished reading. It featured personified woodland creatures and, to my liking, was well beyond grade level reading. My six year-old self was not only appreciative but also somewhat surprised; I didn't realize that this fellow student had recognized my passion for both nature and reading. Many years later, when I first started teaching, a parent expressed her joy that her daughter – for the first time – enjoyed coming to school and was excited about learning because of the approach that I was taking to teaching the course. In that moment, it occurred to me that I was making a significant difference to a student, a family, a classroom. Most significantly, when each of my children was born, I looked into their eyes and felt seen, even recognized, in a way that I had never been noticed before. My very existence was legitimized, honoured, and entirely true. All of these instances demonstrate moments of being acknowledged. They are stories of caring or being cared for, respecting or being respected, appreciating or being appreciated, understanding or being understood. My examples are perhaps not different from others', though experiences of being truly acknowledged are unmistakably memorable, personal, and often these experiences are very moving.

I believe that acknowledgement is a uniquely spiritual experience. Acknowledgement is different from, for example, gratitude, which is a means or method of expressing thanks. Gratitude is arguably in its inexorable heyday, with self-help shelves offering an abundant supply of volumes outlining the benefits of gratitude (Emmons 2007) and ways to adopt an "attitude of gratitude" (Ryan 2009). I suggest in this paper that gratitude has its roots in acknowledgement – either *being acknowledged* or *acknowledging others*. When we are acknowledged or acknowledge others for accomplishments, kindness, achievements, thoughtfulness, or simply presence, the interconnectedness of life is seen and celebrated. This interconnectedness, when noticed and expressed, facilitates meaning – the very essence of human life, and constitutes a deeply spiritual moment.

I offer here my own experiment in acknowledgement. Two methodologies inform how I share this story. First, I incorporate Anderson's (2006) methodology of analytic autoethnography. This practice refers to research in which the author is (1) a full member of the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to a deeper understanding of the theory of social phenomena. Second, I embrace Hochheimer's (2010) theory of the Life Force. Hochheimer suggests that a theory of spirituality and



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communication is (1) grounded in the perception and expression of the "Life Force" which flows through and between all living things, (2) we have physical energy, though it also exists within us via prayer, meditation, and other spiritual activities, (3) the Life Force exists inside, outside, and amongst us, (4) spirituality by definition is when we sense this communal energy, and feel that there is something greater, deeper, or more profound. Hochheimer therefore argues that spirituality infers an understanding of interconnectedness, and an inherent element is the imaginative capacity to understand and express the connection between and amongst individuals. I seek to further Hochheimer's theory by suggesting acknowledgement as a practical means by which we can imagine, express, and practice spiritual communication.

2 My Acknowledgement Experiment

2.1 Why Acknowledgement?

As a full-time academic, I have met and come to know many students. Some I have known for the four years during which they studied at the university in which I teach and research. Others I met only in their final year, or if they took a course that I taught as an elective. There are many students with whom I have maintained close contact, often via social media, which helps in maintaining ties during a time when many young adults are travelling or moving in order to accommodate for new opportunities. As the fall, 2015 semester concluded, I wondered if my students knew how profoundly they had affected me. Did they realize that I remember so many of their contributions to class, experiences shared, challenges given and accepted? Did they know that I remember them, and think about them even many years later?

At the same time, I was particularly impressed with the convictions of a variety of people in my life. For example, a close friend embarked on a years-long dream of being an artist; she began painting, posting her work on Instagram and Facebook, and even sold much of her work. In another arena, a colleague had been tasked with a particularly important leadership role and was working with most admirable integrity and enthusiasm. In a more personal context, I observed an acquaintance who had what seemed to me a wonderful relationship with her husband – one which included trust and joviality, and for which I hope in my own life.

All of the people about whom I was thinking had done or were doing something noteworthy, admirable, and/or inspiring. I noticed them, their work, their beliefs, and their ways of conducting themselves. It became clearer and clearer to me that I needed and wanted to reach out to these people to tell them that I saw what they were doing, and that I admired them. The sentiment that I wanted to communicate was direct and unique to each individual. To them I wished to express some common sentiments:

I see you.

I remember you.

You make a difference.

2.2 Acknowledgement Versus Gratitude

As I reflected upon what I wanted to convey to my students, friends, family, and colleagues, I realized that what I wanted to communicate was not the same as gratitude. I believe that gratitude is a wonderful thing to practice, and it has provided significant benefit to many people. It has the powerful potential to turn one's psychology from negative to positive (for example, Kralik 2011; Bartholomew and Bartholomew 2013). However, my reflection led me to recognize that when expressing gratitude, one is focused upon oneself. For example, one may think, "I am grateful to have [some thing or some experience]". Gratitude may be for beautiful weather, a lovely meal, good health, the company of a good friend. All such things are of benefit to the individual – one is grateful for the positive asset as it relates to their own state of being. Gratitude focuses on "me" or "I".

By contrast, acknowledgement is not at all about oneself. Its focus is the recipient, and in context of respect and admiration – what Buber (1937/1970) calls a relationship with the "Thou". Buber illustrated the importance of relationships in context of the sacred by arguing that humans relate to others as either "It" or "Thou", the latter being a more reverent, meaningful relationship. When one considers others in context of "It", the other is independent of oneself, and one may experience, use, or relate to another as a distinctly separate individual. Rather, when one relates to another as "Thou", the relationship is one of reverence, and the interconnectedness between and amongst individuals is recognized. This interconnectedness is integral to the divine relationship, whereby the discrete boundaries between individuals are dissolved, and common humanity and spirituality is known.

This dissolving of boundaries and spiritual connection is what I wanted to achieve in my acknowledgement experiment. I sought to connect with others in ways that recognized that we are not bound by what Buber calls "subject-object" parameters. The subject-object relationship is one in which separateness is the pervading sentiment – each person is separate from all others. These parameters often exist in expressions of gratitude, in which one may do a favour for another and some benefit is exchanged. I sought to recognize the "subject-subject" relationship, whereby both parties are unified and mutual sharing is evident. I intended that the recipient of my expression of acknowledgement felt understood on a level far more sophisticated than in provid-

ing a meaningful task, completing a good deed, or even via extending a generous gift. The subject-subject relationship as Buber describes it was particularly important as I acknowledged students. I wanted my students – both current and former – to feel recognized and met as equals on a level far more important than an exchange of anything material or tangible.

My search for a framework for this spiritual experiment was not plentiful; there is indeed a dearth of literature on acknowledgement. The most helpful work was Hyde's (2006) monograph, which argues that acknowledgement is a communicative gift that bonds human beings together, and helps to create human solidarity. Hyde suggests that the fundamental element in acknowledgement is awe – being aware of others creates a sense of respect and wonder which serves as the foundation for acknowledgement. As a practice, Hyde adds cautiously, acknowledgement must toe the delicate balance of altruism and ego, whereby one benefits from being acknowledged, yet must be careful to not slip into selfishness. Hyde's work contributes to the area of communication ethics, and Arnett (2008) suggests that a study of acknowledgement deserves "ongoing consideration" (Arnett 2008, 28).

The other venue in which acknowledgment has been discussed is business and leadership. Umlas (2006) suggests that acknowledging others for their contributions leads to positive professional results, can neutralize jealousy, and build stronger relationships. She also argues that acknowledgement leads to increased engagement on the part of business employees, and leads to better results at work (Umlas 2013). I agree with Umlas's premises, though I suggest that acknowledgement as she describes it is too close to gratitude (the title of her second monograph, *Grateful Leadership*, is indicative of her perception of a very close if not inseparable link between the two concepts). In reading Umlas's work, it appears that she is focused perhaps too much on what someone has done for others – the notion of benefit appears too explicit. Acknowledgement, as I conceive of it, recognizes a quality, skill or ideal in someone that deserves positive remark whether it builds business performance or not. Certainly the practice of acknowledgement is well-placed in the business arena, though I suggest that Umlas is too focused on measureable outcomes than personal qualities.

Overall, I suspected that most of the people with whom I associated did not receive as much acknowledgement as they would have liked, and certainly not enough to create what Hyde describes as "excessive selfishness" (Hyde 2006, 220). I was particularly interested in qualities such as loyalty,

inclusivity, diligence, and patience – all of these qualities can lead to success, wellbeing, and even business performance or profit. However, I was interested not so much about what someone did to further measureable outcomes, but rather, a person's individual qualities, talents, or skills, without an explicit focus on outcome. Further, I certainly had a divine message that I ought to reach out to and connect with people in my life who had made a difference to me, to others, or to the community. Hence, my acknowledgement experiment.

2.3 From Start to Everyday Practice

In December, 2015, I began my personal inquiry into an acknowledgement practice. At this time, the fall semester was coming to a close, and I was beginning to plan the winter semester. My experiment fit with course planning for the winter term at the university. As part of the Nonviolent Communication course that I teach, students embark on a peace project: a self-directed personal experiment or project that they had never done before. The project must make a difference in their lives or the lives of others (some projects in the past included visiting a different place of worship every week for the whole semester, enlisting family members in an active recycling program at home, writing a series of short stories, or creating a series of works of art within a particular theme). Each year, I conduct my own project alongside students in order that I am an active participant in the course. In planning the 2016 iteration of the course, I decided that in keeping with my self-imposed expectation to complete a project, I would acknowledge at least one person a day until the completion of the winter semester (30 April).

My acknowledgement project held specific parameters, expectations, and processes. I felt strongly that my acknowledgements should be handwritten. Like Kralik (2012) embraced in his very successful report about his practice of gratitude, I believe that handwritten notes feel special and sincere. Advice on not abandoning the handwritten letter abounds (for example, Hall 2015; Post 2014); overall sentiments are such that the thoughtfulness and permanence of handwritten letters make them superior to often hastily-written, rather impermanent digital communication. Further, Hyde (2006) cautions that the line between acknowledgement and the self-centred demand for immediacy is thin; therefore he suggests being wary of overusing technology in communicate pertaining to acknowledgement.

To this end, I retrieved my copy of Workman's (2015) *You Are Doing a Freaking Great Job* (which was already on my bookshelf – I purchased it on impulse in a bookstore several

months previously, knowing that it would have meaning and use eventually). The square, 4x4 volume contains beautifully illustrated inspirational quotes from both established and developing artists. I carefully removed pages from the book, trimmed edges nicely, and mounted them on complimentary card stock. I then wrote my acknowledgement message on the reverse. In each instance, I chose a quote that I deemed meaningful to the recipient. Figure 1 illustrates an assortment of my handwritten letters. These letters continued daily – even over the winter holidays.

Figure 1. Acknowledgement cards



Some of the acknowledgement letters were delivered via traditional mail service, while others were hand delivered. In order to retrieve postal addresses that I did not already possess, I found communication via Facebook messenger most helpful. Many of my former students were my Facebook friends, therefore connecting via the messenger application facilitated contact even with those who had moved subsequent to graduating from university. Similarly, some friends had moved across North America or overseas. Letters were mailed to San Francisco, New Orleans, Boston, and Dallas, amongst many other locations. In more local context, many of the recipients of my acknowledgements were friends from the yoga studio in which I practice; I hand-delivered most of these cards. Acknowledgements to current students were exclusively hand delivered.

The acknowledgements to current students were an important part of this project, though when I began the project I did not explicitly think that I would go in this direction. Early in January, I wrote a heartfelt acknowledgement to Dan, a former student, letting him know that I remembered the remarkable work that he had done in the Public Speaking class in which he was enrolled some five years previously. When

he was a student, I created certificates from an online template, and recognized every student at some point throughout the semester. For example, students received “awards” for creative delivery, an outstanding introduction, or a memorable conclusion to their speeches. Dan still had the award certificate that I had written for him five years earlier – he emailed me a photo of the certificate above his desk! I realized that these certificates were forms of acknowledgement, and decided to incorporate the same practice again in this winter semester. Throughout my acknowledgement experiment, I printed off a blank “award” and entered a custom statement, and then wrote, on the reverse and by hand, a letter to the student outlining what he or she had done that I found memorable or meaningful. Figure 2 illustrates a certificate to a first year student in the course of this project (for confidentiality purposes, an image of the letter that I wrote to my student is not included).

Figure 2. Acknowledgement certificate for a student



In creating both acknowledgement letters and student “certificates”, I was mindful that the acknowledgement should be different from an expression of gratitude. I acknowledged students for excellent work, attitude, or participation. I acknowledged friends for inspiring conduct, decisions, or personal achievements. In a few instances, someone did something kind for me. For example, an academic friend, John, offered me very helpful feedback on a manuscript in progress. In this case, I could have written him a thank-you letter, as Kralik (2011, 2012) did in his gratitude experiment. Rather, I chose to recognize John’s breadth of knowledge, willingness to spend time in reading and reflection, and his clear and kind way of expressing constructive comments on my work. In this manner, the letter was more about John and his skill and kindness rather than the benefits to myself. This is the spirit in which I conducted this experiment in its entirety.

3 What Happened?

3.1 Recipients

From 4 December, 2015 to 30 April, 2016, I wrote 148 acknowledgement letters – exactly the number of days in the approximate five-month period. After completing this iteration of the project, I quantified the proportion of recipients. The majority of recipients of my acknowledgements were students, at 61% of the whole (39% current students and 22% former students). Almost 20% were friends, 7% people I had never met face-to-face (in this case, academic professionals), 7% were colleagues, and a small proportion of individuals such as business owners/employees, parents of students, a teacher, a neighbour, and one family member. Figure 3 shows the categories of recipients, together with the percent in this project.

Figure 3.
Recipients of acknowledgement

| Recipient | Number | Percent |
|---|--------|---------|
| Current student | 58 | 39% |
| Former student | 32 | 22% |
| Friend (yoga) | 18 | 12% |
| Friend (high school, university, through family) | 11 | 7% |
| Never met (Twitter contacts, academics) | 11 | 7% |
| Colleague | 10 | 7% |
| Businesses (local auto repair shop, local ice cream shop, local eye doctor) | 3 | 2% |
| Parent of current student | 2 | 1% |
| Teacher at child's school | 1 | 1% |
| Neighbour | 1 | 1% |
| Family | 1 | 1% |

3.2 Responses

More than half of the people who I acknowledged responded to my letter: 61% (90 of 148) contacted me either by Facebook messenger, text, email, with a letter in response, or face-to-face. I suspect that many people contacted me via Facebook messenger because it was the medium by which I initiated contact by asking for a postal address. Facebook messenger is also the second most popular mobile messaging app, with over 900 million users per month at April, 2016 (Statista 2016), indicating the ubiquity of its services. Further, I received four handwritten letters, 20 text messages, and 14 emails.

The depth of responses that I received to my acknowledgement letters was nothing short of remarkable. For example, a former student, Meghan, framed the mounted quote that I sent her and displayed it in her apartment, and also mailed to me a card that she had made herself. She wrote that reaching out to her with the letter and quote “meant the world” to her. A current student, Priyana, was in tears when she thanked me face-to-face for the letter that I had written to her. On her graduation day, just a week prior to writing this manuscript, I met her parents. They, too, thanked me for the letter that I had written to their daughter. Priyana’s father wept as I recounted how impressed I am with his youngest child; he had to excuse himself and reorient in order to continue the conversation. In April, I sent a letter to a fellow academic with whom I had connected via Twitter. Though I hadn’t met him face-to-face, I wanted to acknowledge his kindness in supporting my Twitter account. He replied via email, as I’d included my business card with his letter; in a series of email exchanges, it turned out that we have mutual friends and acquaintances, though being from different academic disciplines and geographic areas, we ourselves had never met.

Perhaps my favourite outcome of this project is the relationship that I formed with Lorraine, the parent of one of my daughter’s sports teammates. Lorraine and her husband Ron express a wonderful relationship in which they are jovial, loving, and frequently open their home to others. Given that I was (and I am still) going through a challenging divorce, I found the relationship that Lorraine and Ron share particularly inspiring. Initially, I experienced moments of envy – while this is Ron’s second marriage, and Lorraine’s first, I wondered if I would ever find such happiness as they por-

tray, and at times felt angry that I was suffering. I began to think about what I sincerely admired about their relationship, and what, more specifically, I hoped for myself. To that end, I wrote Lorraine a letter which acknowledged her for being an example of what I hope for in my own life, and with vulnerability I told her of my personal situation (about which at the time she knew nothing).

For weeks, Lorraine and I attended our daughters' sports games, and for weeks she did not say anything about the letter that I had written her. We discussed the wellbeing of the girls in vague terms, she asked if I wanted coffee, and held the door for me on several instances. Given that we had not yet discussed the acknowledgement letter, I became convinced that she thought that I had overstepped my bounds, or had expressed too much of my personal admiration for her and her relationship with her husband. Then, a few weeks later, Lorraine sent me a message via Facebook. She thanked me sincerely for the letter, and said that she was afraid to discuss with me face-to-face because she feared that she would become too emotional. She felt honoured that I admired her relationship with Ron, and invited me and my children to their home for dinner. While there, I casually mentioned that the kids and I were dreaming of one day skiing nearby, and immediately she offered me her timeshare points at a resort. Together Lorraine and I planned several more gatherings of women, including a group that now meets about once a month for dinner and conversation. Lorraine and I agree that without having written the acknowledgement that I did, none of this would have come to pass.

4 Reflection

4.1 Recipients

Given that this acknowledgement experiment was completed during the academic year, it is not a surprise that a great deal of students (61% if current and former students are combined) were recipients of my acknowledgement letters. I included current students in the acknowledgement project because I wanted all of them to feel noticed and recognized. Many former students came to mind as I taught courses which I had instructed before; I was reminded of their contributions, and therefore my acknowledgements were directed to them while I was immersed in the academic semester. Although 61% of the letters in this experiment directed toward students may appear rather high, I believe that this was a product of the experiment being conducted during the academic year. If I participated in this project during the summer

months (as I intend to do, and discuss below), I suspect that more letters would be directed toward family and friends.

I sent about 20% of my acknowledgements to friends, including 12% to friends who are fellow members of the yoga studio in which I practice. As a member of a vibrant yoga community, the people with whom I practice are an integral part of my life, so I am again not surprised by this proportion of recipients. I see many of my "yoga friends" at least weekly; some are in the studio book club that I run, and several I communicate with every day. The yoga community is also a group which is very supportive and inclusive, and to whom spirituality is an inherent aspect in both the practice and in relationships.

I have a significant regret in the outcome of this project. I sent only one acknowledgement letter to a family member (my aunt). As I reflect upon this project and the people to whom I chose to write, I believe that I was not brave enough to write to more members of my family. If I had it to do again (which I will), I would acknowledge my father for his creative spirit and sense of humour which keeps our family laughing. I would acknowledge my mother for her steadfast dedication to keeping our family intact and facilitating communication between and amongst us all. I would acknowledge my brother for his business acumen and skill in visualizing a project finished before he even starts. I would acknowledge my eldest child for her talent and commitment to her sports, and my youngest child for her sense of playfulness that has the ability to send us all into fits of laughter at just the right moment. I would acknowledge my best friend for being a wonderful mother to her adopted child.

I therefore realize, upon reflection, that overall I did not write acknowledgement letters to the people closest to me. I wonder, why did I make this choice? I'm certain that all of my family members would feel pleased and honoured to receive an acknowledgement letter. Perhaps I feel that a single letter would not do my feelings justice: A written card certainly could not hold the depth of my feelings of awe, as Hyde (2006) describes, or so I thought. And so, I avoided it. I do not consider this experiment a failure, despite that I did not write to the people who are my most intimate soul companions. Rather, I will perceive of the first five months of my acknowledgement as a warmup – a priming of sorts. In my next iteration of acknowledgement writing, these people will be the first to receive recognition. Given the emotional proximity of these people to me, I will need to narrow my focus to perhaps one or two qualities in order that I can express myself appropriately in a card-length communicate.

4.2 Responses and Reciprocity

While about 60% of the total recipients of my acknowledgement letters responded in some way to the letters, the remaining 40% did not. The rather large proportion of non-responders correlates to the high proportion of students acknowledged in this project; if current students are removed from the data, then 79% of recipients of my acknowledgement letters responded directly. There are two possibilities for this outcome: current students may not have felt comfortable responding, or they did not feel the need to do so. Of the 18 current students who did respond to the letter that I wrote to them, all but one were fourth year students. In other words, of the 58 current students who received acknowledgement letters, 40 were first year students and 18 were fourth year students. Of the first year students, only one responded. This lends evidence to the premise that students may not have been comfortable responding directly to me as their instructor; fourth year students would arguably feel more experience in communicating with professors and may have been more willing to express their feelings upon receipt of a handwritten letter.

All but one of the colleagues to whom I wrote responded to my acknowledgement letters. It is perhaps more appropriate that a colleague would respond, for as adults in the same academic arena and as professionals, a response likely felt right for such recipients. I was particularly taken with the response from academics with whom I had never met; what ensued was correspondence characterized by humility, kindness, and open-heartedness. Given that acknowledgement by written letter is unusual, as is acknowledgement from someone the recipient had never met, I expect that many colleagues felt compelled to reach out in response. I also enclosed my business card with email and web address in order that the recipient could explore my identity and contact me if desired.

Like colleagues, almost all yoga friends responded to my letters. I was also not surprised by this outcome, for the yoga community in which I participate is highly communicative and positive. Only one yoga friend did not reply, and it may even be that the letter never reached him. My friend Lauren remarked how thoughtful was my letter, and Jamie, the artist, told me that it was just what she needed at the time because she was feeling in a creative rut. To my surprise, none of the business owners responded to the acknowledgement letters that they received, and neither parents of students to whom I wrote responded.

And yet, I suggest that receiving a response from a recipient of my letter is actually not terribly important. Certainly it is

considered good manners to respond in some way to a communicative act. However, it is entirely plausible that the recipient, having internalized my letter, then communicated in a positive way to or for someone else, a la “pay it forward”. In this case, I would have no way of knowing what impact my letter had upon the recipient (I suppose it is possible that the answer could be “none”, though given that when current students are removed from the data, nearly 80% of people replied, this appears unlikely). I am therefore in keeping with Levinas (1984), who argues that it is the responsibility of, for example, an instructor, to teach both with and without reciprocity.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, I also felt the effects of writing a letter: I was able to express my appreciation, admiration, or respect for someone, and then know that I expressed what I wanted and needed to do. Weingarten and Worthen (2009) suggest that the mutuality of acknowledgement is important in ensuring that the giver of an acknowledgement is aware that the recipient is appreciative; this reciprocity is an “incentive to use acknowledgement” (Weingarten and Worthen 2009, 32). I respectfully disagree. Having done this experiment for five months, I did not feel rejected or even discouraged if someone did not reply. Certainly it was pleasant to receive an unexpected letter or digitally-mediated message. However, this was not my expectation. I wished only to feel complete in my expression of acknowledgement from myself.

Another potential explanation for the more frequent response on the part of colleagues, friends, and non-students in this experiment is that the act of acknowledgement is a means of spiritual communication. Acknowledgement expresses admiration and respect, and is an explicit recognition of the interconnectedness of the author and the recipient. In this case, the other adults in my life are peers, and thus may have felt more comfortable responding to a spiritually communicative act. Given that friends from my yoga studio and others who know me well are aware of my spiritual outlook, a gesture of spiritual communication would not have seemed out of place. Students, however, have a limited knowledge of my personal life, and quite likely have a less intent willingness to connect on a spiritual level with their instructor. While current literature (Baesler 2015a, 2015b) suggests that students and faculty can and do connect spiritually in an educational setting, a public, secular institution is arguably not fertile ground for developing spiritual communication between students and faculty.

4.3 Spiritual Communication: Finding the Life Force

It is nearly impossible to quantify the changes in my life having done this experiment. I gained new friends, made new connections, “broke the ice” for new relationships, and learned a great deal about what was going on in the lives of former students or friends. The depth of many of my relationships changed; a former student came to my home to visit for hours one Saturday, an acquaintance became a close friend, a student who never before felt acknowledged became much more participatory and talkative. These kinds of changes in my life cannot be measured. Rather, I can report that I feel more whole. I made myself vulnerable (Brown 2012), my life and circumstances changed, and so too have those of many of the people in my life.

Hochheimer (2010) suggests that the Life Force is a manifestation of spiritual energy in a variety of ways. Most obviously, the Life Force is found in the body (keeping one alive). However, the Life Force is also equally as important when perceived within ourselves through prayer, deep contemplation, ritual dance, and so on. Hochheimer argues that the Life Force is much like the “music between the notes” (Goodall 1996) – it is attention to and recognition of the inherent connections between and amongst individuals. I believe that acknowledgement is a medium through which the Life Force is very much apparent and recognizable. When writing a letter or expression of acknowledgement, I am recognizing the goodness, humanity, talent, or truth in another human. When someone reads and feels the acknowledgement, he or she feels honoured, seen, and accepted for who he or she is. Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes this as “being seen”. Hanh (2012) calls this recognition and acceptance “interbeing”. Acknowledgement recognizes one for being who he or she is, and encourages us to see others in the way they are, not how we desire them to be (or not be).

Acknowledgement is particularly important to finding and celebrating spirituality because humans are a meaning-making species. The primary means by which we create and understand meaning is through communication. Putting pen to paper, sending a message, making a phone call, or even making direct eye contact are all means of communication. Mediated communication is not perfect – it is “used by imperfect beings utilizing imperfect lenses in order to produce incomplete and provisional meanings” (Hochheimer 2010, 225). However, human efforts to close the gap between feeling incomplete and feeling whole are at the heart of the human experience. I suggest that a most meaningful way to express what lies “in-between” us is via acknowledgement. The ability

to express and receive meaning to us and about us contributes to one feeling honoured and whole.

Spiritual communication via acknowledgement is also demonstrated via Buber’s (1937/1970) “I-Thou” relationship. Further to suggesting that the “I-Thou” relationship is more reverent and divine than the separateness inherent in the “I-It” relationship, Buber suggests that there are three spheres of relationships within the “I-Thou” dialogue. He explains that we *exchange* language with fellow humans, *transmit* below language with nature, and *receive* above language with spirit. While dialogue with spirit is arguably the most difficult to comprehend, I suggest that it is quite attainable in the practice of acknowledgement. Examples of spiritual communication, according to Buber, include artistic inspiration, deep thinking, or intense study. In this way, one engages in spiritual communication by means of transcending a current state (i.e., “what is” via creative action in order to tap into the eternal or divine). In this case, writing an acknowledgement is an act of “I-Thou” communication in which the writer directly channels the divine in order to give meaning and love to another. So, too, is reading/receiving an acknowledgement: being receptive to a positive message is receiving a message from the divine and channeled through another. This spiritual address, or spiritual communication, is manifested very clearly via acknowledgement.

4.4 Gratitude and Acknowledgement as Spiritual Communication

I am very glad that, as a child, I was taught to write thank-you notes to family members and friends when they gave me a gift or did something special for me. Expressions of gratitude are an important form of politeness and such expressions are meaningful and well placed. While the traditional handwritten thank-you note is good manners, a great deal of literature has recently been published on gratitude and its potential to transform. For example, Kralik (2011) spent over a year writing thank-you notes and reported a remarkable shift in his relationships and life circumstances. Similarly, Hailey Bartholomew (2013), in an attempt to help herself through a depression, sought to photograph one item or event per day which made her grateful; her photo essay is published in conjunction with her husband and demonstrates a remarkable transformation toward happiness.

Gratitude has its roots in acknowledgement, though I suggest that it is arguably a less sophisticated human expression. Consider, for example, acknowledgement of a gift – perhaps for graduation, marriage, or another milestone. One

may write a lovely letter thanking the giver for the gift, and express how the gift will help to establish a home, purchase something, or look perfect upon the wall and the recipients will think kindly of the gift-givers when they see this particular object. However, acknowledging the giver for his or her careful choice, creativity, or thoughtfulness is a different kind of expression. In an evolved form of gratitude, one is not grateful so much for the material gift – he or she acknowledges the giver(s) for their generosity, care, or kindness. The highest form of gratitude is, indeed, acknowledgement.

Having done this acknowledgement experiment, I am uncomfortable with the hierarchy inferred by gratitude as it is discussed in contemporary culture. In the case of gratitude, one is thankful, humbled, or indebted to another. Acknowledgement, by contrast, is a state of being in which one human recognizes the humanity, goodness, and spirit in another. Perhaps Gloria Steinem (2016) said it best when she reiterated that, “[h]umans are actually linked, not ranked, and that a circle, not a hierarchy, was the first and by far the longest-lasting human organizing principle”. Acknowledgement completes the circle of humanity whereby one person (or perhaps group of people) do something kind or positive, and another person (or group of people) recognizes this kindness or generosity. In this manner, the energy expressed is met in reciprocity via acknowledgement: when one does something helpful or good, energy is returned. Therefore interconnectedness is expressed and recognized, and the “music between the notes” (Goodall 1996) is heard.

In the yoga community, practitioners use the expression “Namaste”. An ancient Sanskrit word, which is still used as a greeting in India, *namaste* literally translated, means, “I bow to you” (Palkhivala 2014). An expression of acknowledgement is a material version of this greeting. The one acknowledging, by writing, speaking, or even making eye contact, figuratively bows to a fellow human. Common humanity and spirituality is recognized. I propose that acknowledgement is actually a form of service to others. By revering another human, we make ourselves responsible for finding and recognizing the beauty around us. Further, we may become more accountable for our own actions. As I conducted my acknowledgement experiment, I wanted to behave in ways which would make me worth an acknowledgement from others – and perhaps more importantly, from myself.

Acknowledgement is also central to spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh’s (2008) *Four Mantras*. Outlined in his book, *Happiness*, Hanh suggests that practicing the Four Mantras can transform a situation immediately: (1) “Darling, I am here for you,” (2) “Darling, I know you are there, and I am very happy,”

(3) “Darling, I know you suffer, that’s why I am here for you,” and (4) “Darling, I suffer, please help”. Each of these mantras acknowledge the relationship between the speaker and his or her beloved (in this case, the beloved may be a child, friend, partner, or family member, for example).

In Hanh’s first mantra, the relationship between the speaker and the beloved is acknowledged very clearly by expressing true presence. In the second mantra, the relationship is acknowledged with an additional expression of happiness. The third mantra, perhaps most powerfully, acknowledges the suffering of the beloved and the promise of presence on behalf of the speaker. Finally, the fourth mantra acknowledges the interdependence of both parties in the relationship, particularly when one party is believed to have caused harm. All of these statements embody the “I-Thou” reverence as outlined by Buber. The element of respect, admiration, and pure presence is inherent in Hanh’s mantras, and are key principles in the acknowledgement letters that I wrote.

Hanh suggests that “To love means to acknowledge the presence of the person you love. You have to have the time, if you are too busy, how can you acknowledge his presence?” (Hahn 2008, 171). The writing of acknowledgement letters expressed Hanh’s mantras, and in particular, the first three. Students, for example, learned that I was there to support them throughout their academic journeys, as I offered to write letters of reference or further advice throughout university and after graduation. My friends receiving acknowledgement letters from me understood that I recognized their efforts, their resilience in the face of challenge, or their accomplishments. Therefore the second and third mantras were practiced sometimes even in the same letter. The acknowledgement letters did not practice the fourth mantra, which is exercised when the person one loves causes pain or suffering. In this case, however, the relationship between myself and the recipients of my letters would have been strengthened, thus opening the opportunity to practice the fourth mantra should it ever need to be employed.

5 Conclusion: What Now?

As a communication scholar, I am particularly interested in the relationship between spirituality and the ways in which we relate to one another. After all, communication is the process of meaning making. Understanding and embodying meaning is rather existential, whereby one may wonder: Why am I here? What can I contribute? Acknowledgement is a way of finding meaning and answering these questions. We do this by means of perceiving and then expressing: I see in

someone a particular skill, talent, kindness, or quality. I then express the meaning that this person has to me, his or her environment, or even as I observe it relating to another person (as I noted with friends Lorraine and Ron). I argue in this paper that expression is vital to making meaning. Acknowledgement is essential for the *acknowledger* because he or she develops the ability to recognize and appreciate the importance of others in ways that celebrate who and what they are right now (not what they ought to be). Acknowledgement is similarly essential for the *acknowledgee* because he or she feels seen, appreciated, and has an augmented understanding of his or her meaning in the world.

I will continue this acknowledgement project. However, in its next iteration, I will make changes. I will acknowledge more family members and more close friends. I intend to conduct the subsequent iteration(s) of this project with additional courage and daring to make myself more vulnerable (Brown 2012) in expressing my awe of others. I will also set aside a semester in which I acknowledge exclusively students, and find ways to connect with every student enrolled in my courses. Educational psychology focusing on motivation (e.g., Schunk, Pintrich and Meece 2014) will be of particular importance in this iteration of the project. Further, I am presently conducting a research project involving participants' experiences in acknowledging others, thus significantly expanding the body of scholarly literature on the practice of acknowledgement.

A particular challenge with this experiment is that it is very difficult – if not impossible – to quantify the changes experienced by means of acknowledgement. My life has changed, the lives of the people I acknowledged changed, and the lives of individuals with whom we all interact changed as well. As a scholar and social scientist, I am tempted to at least attempt to measure and assess changes in context of an experiment. Given the nebulous changes and depth of responses on the part of both myself and recipients, I suggest that a deeper understanding of acknowledgement is to be found not via quantification, but in engaging in the practice and focusing more on feelings of connection, understanding, and finding meaning in one's life.

Research suggests that people are more apt to behave in socially responsible ways when they think others take notice (Ruvinsky 2014). Having done this experiment, it appeared that many of my students, colleagues, and friends felt as if others did not notice their contributions (at least as much as they would have liked). As the author of 148 letters of acknowledgement, I attest that my own feelings of being noticed were augmented; I became more aware of behaving in

ways that would warrant an acknowledgement from someone else. In this manner, acknowledgement is much more holistic than is gratitude; the former recognizes the individual for who and what they are, while the latter easily falls prey to hierarchical relationships and a focus on deeds or tasks.

Acknowledgement is a spiritual act. It finds and communicates the connections between and amongst people. It recognizes the reverent "Thou" as Buber (1937/1970) describes, and facilitates relationships between and amongst individuals that are not hierarchical, but rather, celebrate relationships of equality. The equality demonstrated by acknowledgement is not based on how one contributes to outcome or results, and is not based upon one person's seniority and praise of another's accomplishments. Acknowledgement is found when the interconnectedness and common humanity to be found in subject-subject relationships is seen and expressed. Mediated communication is by practice an imperfect means of expression, though I suggest that when one acknowledges another, meaning is not just expressed, but also made and felt. It is then that not just the "music between the notes" (Goodall 1996), but also an entire chorus, can be heard.

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