

**The Wild Writer**

**A Heuristic Inquiry into the Ecological Writer's Experience of Nature**

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## **Abstract**

In this heuristic study, I explore how four ecological writers, or wild writers, experience Nature. I identify with and participate in this inquiry because I am an ecological writer searching to understand my relationship to the natural world. That relationship begins in primary experience. The term “Nature” core to this exploration includes interactions of all dispositions of Gaia, organic and inorganic, human and not human, constructed by humans and constructed by non-humans, as well as phenomena both biospheric and cosmic, visible and invisible, physical and metaphysical, since these are all within the realm of human experience. Applying the concepts, processes, and phases of Moustakas (1990) heuristic methodology, I engage in informal conversational interviews with four women writers about their experiences of Nature and also examine their writings as depictions of those experiences. Because heuristic methodology requires the engaged presence of the primary investigator, I create ongoing self-dialogues about my experience as well as review my own writing. From all this data I discover the following composite key elements from these ecological writers’ experiences of Nature: 1) The wild writer experiences Nature as a summons or response from non-human worlds; 2) The wild writer experiences Nature as conversations among all beings in the cosmos; 3) The wild writer experiences Nature as a vast capacity to harm as well as heal; 4) The wild writer experiences Nature with the exterior body; 5) The wild writer experiences Nature with the interior body; 6) The wild writer experiences Nature as the source of imagination; and 7) The wild writer experiences Nature with sadness. These key experiences reveal the wild writer’s multiple embodied relationships with Nature, the embryo of awareness for healing our endangered planet.

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### **Introduction: Writing for the Life of Nature**

The ecological writer writes for the life of Nature in a wounded world, invoking an essential partner: the astounding natural world, which does not speak human languages, but speaks millions of its own. The ecological writer's relationship to Nature is not based on difference but rather blending, not misperceptions but receptivity and trust that "meaningful speech is not an exclusively human possession" (Abram, 2010, p. 4). The word nature is derived from the Latin word *natura*, meaning "essential qualities, innate disposition." For this study, "nature" (uncapitalized) means the Earthly physical world. When I refer to "Nature" (capitalized) my meaning is more expansive and includes all the essential, innate interactions of all dispositions of Gaia, organic and inorganic, human and not human, constructed by humans and constructed by non-humans, as well as phenomena both biospheric and cosmic, visible and invisible, physical and metaphysical, since these are all within the realm of human experience. This definition is similar to what philosopher Ken Wilber calls Kosmos (2001, p. 45): the entirety of existence, including physical nature, biospheric nature, the cosmos, as well as spiritual dimensions (Wilber, 2001, p. 45; Davis, 1998, p. 66). Most important is that all of Nature resounds with multiple voices, and the ecological writer listens.

Writing is the wordsmith's "instrument for coming to understanding," wrote author and teacher John Gardner (1981 p. 38), yet prior to putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), how do ecowriters fundamentally experience those voices of Nature, the springboard for dialogue that



can lead to mutual understanding, reverence, empathy, and healing of the wounded world? This is my thesis question. Put more succinctly: How does the ecological writer experience Nature?

The prefix “eco” used throughout this inquiry refers to its Greek origin meaning “home.

Our home is all Nature, and it is central to this study because we “are composed of the same nature as the world” (Hillman in Roszak, 1995, p. xix), and this world is suffering. This is the foundation of the ecological writer’s being; every human’s being, though we have steadily drifted from that awareness. Humans’ touchstone within Nature is the physical nature of planet Earth. Theodore Roszak (1995) defines the ecological unconscious as the “savage” inside us all that contains the voice of the Earth and all of the cosmos (p. 96). This recognition of the internal voice of Earth “leads one to finding one’s connection with nature, towards loving nature (ecophilia)” (van Schalkwyk, 2011, p. 87). To fuel this connection, the ecowriter gives full attention to Nature in any available environment—whether it be the writer’s own body, a potted plant in a bedroom, a city, a garden, a wilderness, a landscape painting, a prayer, or the imaginal reflection on any of these gifts.

Because I am an ecological writer, I resonate with the concepts and processes of heuristic experiential research. My experiences of Nature define me as a person as well as a writer. I have loved the outdoors since my early childhood in New England, where my mother daily told me to “go outside and find something to do.” We moved to the Valley of Mexico when I was 12 years old, and there I discovered the magic of landscape. For 20 years, I was a multi-sensory language arts educator incorporating all the senses into my curriculum. I lived on an organic farm in Wisconsin where I raised two daughters, both born at home, and I later built a straw-bale cabin and an adobe house in New Mexico and provided small group intensive writing workshops for five years. Now, I have become an avid backpacker and traveler, and I facilitate outdoor group

Trail Writing experiences. I have taken long-distance hikes, solo mountain journeys, and done a four-day vision quest in the arms of Mother Nature. My experiences have taught me that not only do I love to go outdoors but I also need to go outdoors for my emotional, spiritual, and physical health. It also inspires my literary creativity.

As an ecological writer who now writes for the life of Nature, I do not make a distinction between wild Nature and all Nature. Wildness in our cosmos is not simply the opposite of tamed. It includes all the complex ecotones, or fluid boundaries, between multiple elements, evolving qualities, and resilient dispositions of the natural world, which include the human world. While humans often believe that reason, science, and technology render the world tamed, our manipulations are just on a different scale than a bird weaving a nest, a river carving a channel, or moonlight influencing tides. There is so much more that can never be tamed, such as fundamental interactions between cells, movement of the Earth's crust, the influence of a skyscraper on the human psyche, the relationship between sun and life. Furthermore, as Terry Tempest Williams writes, "Wildness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from" (2005, p. 144). Therefore, throughout this study, I use the formal words "ecological writer" and "ecowriter" interchangeably with the more feral, untamable wild writer.

Yet, there is another metaphor specific to my vision of ecological writing and the writer's experience of Nature. Imagine this phenomenon: In northeastern India, the War-Khasis are a tribe of the Meghalaya region, the Abode of Clouds, which is one of the wettest places on Earth. During the rainy season, the river chasms surge with water and become impassable. Over the

ages, the War-Khasis learned to encourage and coax *Ficus elastica* tree roots to grow across river chasms to create footbridges (Jackson, 2009). Many of the bridges are now over 500 years old, gaining strength over time. Creation of the root bridges is not an act of taming but an ecological collaboration between the elements of wild Meghalaya (Flowers, 2011). Ecological writers are wild, too, like the reciprocal ecotones between the War-Khasis, the tree and its adventitious roots, the rain, the rivers, the clouds, the stones used for footsteps, and all the creatures that engage with the root bridge. The wild writer crosses the chasms of human-Nature communication to experience elements of the cosmos that all have voices, but ones that too many humans don't comprehend. Wild writers stand on both sides of the bridge as witnesses, participants, and translators, "one foot in literature and the other on land" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. xix).

### **The Study: Journey to the Source**

An expedition is a journey with a purpose, and the purpose of this heuristic expedition is to travel to the source of the ecological writer's engagement and inspiration: primary experience of Nature. It begins with my desire to understand and articulate not just how to write in service to the planet, but how to convey the basic qualities of a writer's experience of Nature that potentially lead to others writing in service to the planet.

Heuristic methodology is based on discovery of the inherent features of a human experience (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). John Dewey (1929) examines the essence of experience, asserting that it "is no infinitesimally thin layer or foreground of nature but that it penetrates into it, reaching down into its depths, and in such a way that its grasp is capable of expansion" (p. 3a). In heuristic research that expansiveness is revealed by "reaching into deeper and deeper regions of a human problem or experience and coming to know and understand its dynamics and constituents more and more fully" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 13). My exploration and elucidation of the ecological writer's experience of Nature reaches deep by using heuristic processes of identification, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, and focusing.

I am a wild writer and, as the expedition's primary researcher, I crossed the literary bridge to Nature with several writers over the course of the year prior to the research phase of this inquiry. Together, we beheld our heartfelt love of Nature in a bimonthly writing workshop called Spirit/Nature/Story (SNS). Each session was an interactive writing experiment that endeavored to open our senses to voices of the vast natural world in an introductory earth-based

ritual (Spirit), present a thoughtful writing prompt that sought a connection to the natural world (Nature), and write (Story). We didn't seek simply to write about Nature; we wanted to speak with it.

Heuristic research begins with the internal intuitive quest of the researcher (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11). I chose this methodology because, although many writers eloquently observe and witness aspects of physical nature, I intuited that it was my co-writers' deeply felt experiences that informed their relationship and commitment to Nature. After many SNS sessions in which web-like conversations and personal histories infiltrated our mutual engagement in addition to shared writing, I wanted to enter the frontier of each one's original encounters:

The idea of investigating the last frontier may create images of climbing to the heights of rugged mountain peaks or exploring the depths of the ocean's floor, of developing more powerful tools to peer into the farthest reaches of outer space or interior spaces of the atom. But I believe there is *terra incognita* that may be much closer and, yet may be more difficult to explore than other places. This final frontier, I propose, is the interiority of our experience where feeling, left unnoticed and thought to be insignificant, may be not just a component of the landscape but rather the crucial feature. (Sela-Smith, 2001, p. 22)

Four of the SNS participants agreed to explore the wild writer's *terra incognita* as co-researchers for this study because "whether sounded on the tongue, printed on the page, or shimmering on the screen, language's primary gift is not to re-present the world around us, but to call ourselves into the vital presence of that world—and into deep presence with one another" (Abram, 2010, p. 11). My internal frame of reference as a practicing wild writer provided me with the foundation to encourage each writer co-researcher to "express, explore, and explicate the meanings that are

within his or her experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 26). Together, we ecowriters endeavored to unearth some key elements that may embrace and include experiences of other ecowriters in our collective quest to save the planet.

Each wild writer in this study is an avid participant, in one way or another, in the bounteous outdoor natural world. A future study might take wild writers into nature to capture their immediate experience in situ. This is not, however, on the map of this heuristic adventure. It is also important to note that all four co-researchers and the primary researcher are women, which may distinguish our experiences of nature. It would be another subject for study to compare and contrast how male and female ecowriters experience Nature.

On this expedition, like Darwin collecting samples all over the globe for his herbarium and finally hearing them speak the truth of evolution (Kohn et al, 2005, p. 645), I, the primary researcher, gathered each of the co-researcher’s voices in taped natural unfolding dialogues in which we spoke about our evolving experiences with Nature. The co-researchers’ dialogues were approved through an IRB process and undertaken with the informed consent of the participants (See Appendix A). In an open, safe, sharing environment, we illuminated some essentials of the ecowriter’s experience of the lustrous natural world.

Being a lover of language, I am delighted that Moustakas expands the quality and definition of data by insisting that “the material collected must depict the experience in accurate, comprehensive, rich, and vivid terms. In heuristic research, depictions are often presented in stories, examples, conversations, metaphors, and analogies” (1990, p. 49). So, I encouraged participants to offer writing samples of their fiction, nonfiction, or poetry that addressed or

reflected their experiences of Nature.

In unfolding the analysis and presentation of the wild writer's experience of nature, I depart in from the traditional sequential outline of the research manuscript (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 53-4). On retreat for a month in the San Luis Valley of Colorado to write this thesis, I take very seriously the requirement to live and breathe the question, "to come to intimate terms with the question—to live and grow in knowledge and understanding of it" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). My body participates in an unfettered natural environment and my mind absorbs the experiences of Nature as expressed by my co-researchers. I express my own immersion in the question (p. 28) in the form of self-dialogues inspired by the confluence of the thesis content and my participation in a present-time experience of Nature. These self-dialogues are placed in the work in the sequence in which they are created. Fortunately, Moustakas (1990) makes room for this by saying, "each research process unfolds in its own way" (p. 43). As the heuristic thesis creator (p. 9), I embrace the opportunity to write with a slightly new paradigm as long as "the intensity, wonder, intrigue, and engagement" (p. 55) are sustained for both the reader and myself. For example, the traditional manuscript presents the Literature Review section as a logical and sensible reflection on how, where, and why my research fits into the field. It is background material that does not anticipate the results of the study. When William Zinsser studied the intersection of writing and learning, however, he discovered that "writing and thinking and learning" (1989, p. ix) are the same process. Writing engaged "the imagination, the intellect, and the emotions" and became, like all life, "a constantly evolving organism" (Zinsser p. 155). I don't hold back my learning about the question as I review the theories and methods that led me to it. As I present the literature and methods explored prior to my full immersion in the question, I evolve and respond as a writing organism.

My experience of Nature does not come to a halt while I write this thesis; on the contrary, it is ever present, ever emerging. The site-specific encounters I am having with the night sky, wild horses, the Rio Grande, Ute Mountain, and more impel me “to abandon an accepted framework of interpretation and commit . . . by the crossing of a logical gap, to the use of a new framework” (Polanyi in Moustakas, 1990, p. 123). My self-dialogues are written as reflective narratives because that is my style of self-talk about experience. For the sake of clarity for the reader, however, there is at least one explicit focus about my experience of Nature embedded in each chronicle. They also are set off from the body text with italic font. They serve as my unfolding individual portrait. Collectively, these narratives illuminate my engagement with the question using my writer’s tools: vivid language, stories, and metaphors.



### Literature Review: Unearthing the Elements

I began my studies in ecological writing because I am a writer with a commitment to ecological justice (Green, 2010b, pp. 136-7) and I have had significant participatory experiences with nature (Green, 2010a). In order to discover the substance of ecological writing and the ecological writer, I wove through the literature of many relevant subjects, such as writing to learn, deep ecology, ecocriticism, ecopsychology, ecofeminism, various genres of writing, and finally ecospirituality. Although much research has been done on related areas of creativity in nature, experiences of men and women in nature, nature as represented in writing, sensory awareness in nature, and psycho-spiritual transformations in nature, I touch on those subjects in this study only insofar as they affect or illuminate the experience of the ecological writer. This inquiry's combination of focus, themes, and heuristic methodology is original.

There is abundant analysis of various literary styles that draw on place or nature, including personal narratives, ecofiction, nature writing, and sociopolitical or environmental commentary. It is not the task of this study to explore how any given author manifests the human/nature relationship or what analytic pedagogy defines that relationship. That is the realm of the ecocritic, and the broad sweep of that field can be found in the anthology titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks In Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996), as well as Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004) and Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005). Ecocriticism, however, has been essential to placing the human-nature equation in the forefront of the literary imagination. At the time of the anthology's release, Glotfelty wrote that even in late twentieth century, in the literary profession, "you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed you might never know that there was an earth at all" (p. xvi). Now we do because of the commitment of writers,

environmentalists, citizens, communities, and organizations to expose the damage, and as the environmental crisis has escalated, so too has the commitment of ecocritics to address the role of nature and expand the boundaries of Nature in narrative with less distance than traditional critical stances. My study, however, seeks the least distance between the writer and Nature: primary experience.

With respect to nature writing, *Orion* editor, H. Emerson Blake, says, “We live in a time in which a wholly new way of thinking about our relationship to the environment is being created” (in Peterson, 2001, p. xi), and nature writers are “shaping new models of how we might live on this planet. They remind us of the wonders—and dangers—surrounding us that so many others have forgotten, or never knew about” (p. xi). This engagement is critical to the wild writer, but models and reminders do not constitute an experience that informs the model or reminder. Also, nature writing generally refers to physical nature not the more expansive view of Nature

Although unrelated to my inquiry’s specific focus on wild writers’ experiences, two studies, offered important referential vocabulary for this exploration. An ecocritical study of “Nature Writing as Experience” by Cornelius William Browne (2001) was of particular interest to me because Browne also uses the metaphor of the ecotone. His use, however, focuses on the boundaries that “mediate between writer, reader, and the physical world.” Browne’s purpose was to show that “through its deep understanding of ecological interrelationship, nature writing represents the human being in a position that is already and always embedded in the common, physical world” (p.16). Yet this context of experience reminded me of Slovic’s comments about

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in which he states:

The book is actually a study of Dillard's disconnection with the little patch of Virginia countryside near Tinker Creek, full of awareness-prompting misperceptions, occasions when the author recalls expecting to see one thing and then encountering another. (Slovic in Golfley & Fromm, p. 358)

My inquiry is not about how the writer stands in disconnected relation to nature or Nature; it asks how the receptive, listening ecowriter experiences Nature. Nonetheless, Browne came up with several aspects of experience that inform the nature writer, including attention to detail, perception of space, silence, wonder, and particularity of place (2001, p. iii).

In a study not related to writing titled "Twelve Men's Experiences of Feeling Deeply Connected with Nature" (2008), Eugene Kranz illuminated several other qualities of experience that offer more possibilities for reflection in my study: nature as a mirror, sensing deeply, feeling deeply, connection to something greater, and shift in environmental consciousness (pp. iii-iv).

I gathered from these studies valuable perspective and vocabulary, and I consider all authors of the great body of literature I explored, cited and not cited, to be my teachers.

### **Themes: Spirit, Nature, Story**

The SNS writing group was an intuitive experiment in how to generate writing about Nature that paralleled my ongoing theoretical studies of deep ecology, ecopsychology, and ecospirituality and how they influence wild writing. My original intention was not to find a foundation for a heuristic research project, yet from the interaction of spirit, nature, and story in the group emerged tantalizing "associations and fleeting awarenesses" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 13) of the ecowriter's experience, what Moustakas calls "the initial 'data' within me" (p. 13).

In the Creative Synthesis section of Moustakas (1990, pp. 89-90), I came across a study with direct reference to writing experience, a dissertation that researched the experience of writing poetry (Vaughn, 1990) using heuristic methodology. The key elements of this study confirmed some initial data in my quest to learn how the ecowriter experiences Nature:

Analysis of data revealed three essential components of the experience: 1) writing poetry is precipitated by a compelling urge to create which springs out of an intensely felt event, situation, or emotion; 2) it is a spiritual experience which enables the writer to transcend ordinary reality and time; and 3) it is an integrative experience of self and awareness which enhances identity and awareness. (p. iii)

These results closely paralleled the spirit, nature, story paradigm and suggested to me, for example, that the ecological writer's experience, too, might spring from an intensely felt event or situation in nature, might be or evolve from a spiritual experience of Nature or earth-based ritual that transcends ordinary reality, and/or might integrate the identity and self awareness of the wild writer through writing.

I have, therefore, framed my literature review according to spirit, nature, and story because these themes organize the study of the ecowriter's experience in a way "that cluster into patterns" suggested by key experiences revealed in the studies by Browne, Kranz, and Vaughn "and which organize the presentation of findings" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 53) with clarity and consistency.

### *Spirit*

Spirit is the simplest word describing the ecowriter's integration of human and non-human Nature. The evolving body of study of this relationship is often called ecospirituality, defined as "a relationship experienced personally by an individual with his [sic] environment" (Barbadoro and Nattero, 2012, para 1). Furthermore, "this relationship arises from an inner experience, without any preconceived ideas or ideological ties affecting or limiting it, but based on free individual contact with existence" (para. 1). It is not historically or culturally novel in that this relationship has been accessed through earth-based rituals and ceremonies "evolved over thousands of years by diverse cultures" (Foster and Little, 2009, p. 14).

On the subject of the ecospiritual experience, Jeanette Carney explored Carl Jung's nature-based psychology as an affirmation of the view that nature is a "participatory, intelligent, and purposive being" (2007, p. iii). She analyzed the experiences of four women who, through participation in a ritual Fire Ceremony, showed how "critical Earth-based rituals are to human health, wellbeing, and ecological sustainability" (p. iii). Of interest to my study, in her reference to the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, she notes that "Ritual creates a 'third space'" (p. 153) in which the participant has a "viscerally experienced connection with Earth" (p. 157).

David Abram, Derrick Jensen, Joanna Macy, Molly Brown, John Davis, John Seed, Steven Foster, Meredith Little, Phillip Costigan, and others all offer important models for achieving a sense of spirit within the expansive view of Nature. In *Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram suggests we start with our most familiar habitat, our own bodies:

As we reacquaint ourselves with our breathing bodies then the perceived world itself begins to shift and transform. When we begin to consciously frequent the wordless dimension of our sensory participations, certain phenomena that have habitually

commanded our focus begin to lose their distinctive fascination and slip toward the background, while hitherto unnoticed or overlooked presences begin to stand forth from the periphery and to engage our awareness.... We find ourselves alive in a living field of powers far more expressive and diverse than the strictly human sphere to which we are accustomed. (1996, p. 63-65)

For Jensen that “field of powers” (p. 65) also comes from:

the experience of listening and communicating with non-humans—including other mammals, other animals, fungi, plants, bacteria, and others; and also beings this culture does not even consider to be living, such as rivers, rocks, mountains, stars, soil, and others; and also beings this culture does not even consider to exist, such as muses, dreamgivers, spirits, and others. (2011 p. vii)

Joanna Macy has named the consequences of such individual and collective ecoperceptual change *The Great Turning*. In this moment of collective shifting awareness from human centeredness to the revitalized awareness of all others in the cosmos, “We awaken to what we once knew: we are alive in a living Earth, source of all we are and can achieve.... We want to name, once again, this world as holy” (1998, p. 21).

Ecospiritual ritual has been a human practice for as long as we know humans have engaged in any spiritual practice. It was expressed in the shamanistic scenes of wildlife and hunting painted on cave walls as many as 30,000 years ago (Clottes, 2002, p. 7). Ancient burial sites included bones of wild animals and seeds that participated in the passage between realms of life and death (Aleshkin et al. 1983, p. 137). Wild sacred sites named or created for spiritual

transitions abound, from mountain peaks to stone circles to sacred groves. This is now defined as sacred ecology:

the human experience of divinity in relation to the natural environment, real or represented. Landscape is construed not simply as scenery, but as a cultural complex in which the natural world and human practice, conceptual and material, are dynamically linked and constantly interacting. (Sacred Ecology, 2011, para. 1)

Sacred ecology is not just an experience of traditional or ancient cultures. Steven Kaplan and John Talbot researched the effects of nature on contemporary humans and found that:

The wilderness inspires feelings of awe and wonder, and one's intimate contact with this environment leads to thoughts about spiritual meanings and eternal processes. (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983, p. 178)

Yet Gary Snyder reminds us that

we do not easily know nature, or even know ourselves. Whatever it actually is, it will not fulfill our conceptions or assumptions. It will dodge our expectations and theoretical models. There is no single or set "nature" either as "the natural world" or "the nature of things." The greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional. (1993, p. v)

It is not a facile or simple process for us to experience a relationship with Nature.

For Macy and Brown (1998), ecospiritual rituals are a calling of our times to address and ameliorate the human-created planetary wound. The central purpose of their group ritual experiences called "the Work that Reconnects" (p. 57) is "to help people uncover and experience their innate connections with each other and with the systemic, self-healing powers in the web of life, so that they may be enlivened and motivated to play their part in creating a sustainable

civilization” (1996, p. 58).

Through ecospirituality, then, the ecowriter has the potential to experience what Abram calls “reciprocity of the sensuous” (1996, p. 56) that was once common in earth-based cultures but now has been diminished in the modern human-nature relationship—experiences such as wild creature encounters, knowledge of local habitat, engagement with weather, and a sense of being summoned into a wild setting. Phillip Costigan agrees:

Some of the formal rituals of an earth-sensitive spirituality include those that honour the Sacred as it is manifested at summer and winter solstice; at autumn and spring equinox; in the phases of the moon; in the daily cycle of dawn, daylight, dusk and darkness; in the story of the cosmos; in the life cycle of plants and animals; in the sacredness of particular places, and so on. (p. 43)

Sacredness, in other words, can occur in any place at any time.

Abram also asserts that writing separated human stories from their sacred ecological origins and this in turn contributed to human displacement from knowing our earthly terrain as it was embodied through ritual and oral storytelling (1996, p. 183). Abram doesn’t want us to toss writing to the wind, though. On the contrary, perhaps wild writers can revitalize the written word with the dynamism of ritual.

Our task rather is that of taking up the written word, with all its potency, and patiently, carefully writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves—to the green uttering-forth of leaves from the spring branches. (p. 273)



Such ecospiritual engagement is experiential and has many names: depth perception, resonance, soul, spirit, unity, even magic.

This foundation of ecological awareness embraces what ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak calls radical nonduality, which “asserts the existence of unitive dimensions of being, a gestalt of a subtle, unitary field of motion, space, and time” (Spretnak in Warren (ed.), 1997, p. 245). Psychologist Gerald May describes the unitive experience as the perception of being-at-one, unthinking but with a sustained sense of body, opening intense awareness without mental labeling, and feeling reverence and awe (1987, pp. 59-62). To hear the voices of all Nature, does the ecowriter experience this eco-perceptual state in which the other and the self are the same, becoming a literary shaman, in the same sense that Abram describes a shaman?

It is not by sending his [sic] awareness out beyond the natural world that the shaman makes contact with the purveyors of life and health, nor by journeying into his personal psyche; rather it is by propelling his [sic] awareness laterally, outward into the depths of the landscape at once both sensuous and psychological, the living dream we share with the soaring hawk, the spider, and the stone silently sprouting lichen on its coarse surface. (1996, p. 10)

Entering this intense state of inclusive awareness on demand seems like a tall order. Monastics and mystics practice for lifetimes in elaborately cloistered settings. Fortunately, the living, breathing vibrant cosmos is perceptually available to ecowriters, if we let our senses do what they have always done: feel, see, taste, hear, touch, move, and breathe. Laura Sewall shows that perception and ecospirituality are directly linked because perception is “a vehicle for communion with the non-human natural world and may be experienced as a spiritual practice. We experience reverence, simply by looking” (Sewall in Roszak, 1995, p. 213).

In an article for *Orion* magazine, she illuminated how perceptual skills can evolve our relationship to Nature:

In relation to developing an ecological consciousness, skillful perception necessarily includes emphasizing perceptual practices that help us to extend our narrow experience of self and to experience sensuality, intimacy, and identification with the external world.

(Sewall, 1990, p. 204)

Sewall developed five specific skills of ecological perception that facilitate the experience of oneness with all (Sewall, 1995, 1999) and potentially to begin Abram's shamanistic participatory listening, to hear voices that don't speak human languages, and to give wild writers a perceptual vocabulary to translate that insight into an entrancing human/Nature communion: story. While Sewall regards vision as the primary perceptual tool because it engages fifty percent of the cortex of the brain, all the senses benefit from the exercise of these skills.

**Attention.** When placing oneself within nature's embrace, the first skill of ecological perception is attention (Sewall, 1995, p. 206). By re-learning how to attend, the doorway to sensory awareness is opened. Focused attention can awaken richness of color, clarity of light, distinctions of sounds, and heightened sense of smell. "According to Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the first step in spiritual practice is the cultivation of a 'wakeful presence'. If this is mindfulness, then attention may, in addition, bring us spiritually closer to the visible world" (p. 207). Interestingly, Thich Nhat Hahn also writes about walking meditations as a form of heightened attention (1996). In the same vein, solo backpacker Chris Townsend says that when hiking he always seeks a time when he is "not really thinking but rather absorbing all that lies

around” him (2000, p. 2).

**Perceiving the relations.** The second skill challenges the assumption that humans are different than or other than or better than the rest of creation. After stretching the boundaries of awareness with attention, the perception of relations emerges. We sense we are an integral part of a completely interdependent system (Sewall, 1995, p. 203). To train the eye to see within and not just around the scene, Laura Sewall offers this ubiquitous example:

Water flows all over rocks and sand. We can see water flow over, under, and around. We see water deflect, merge, lick, crash, and softly lap up against. We see water reflect like giant mirrors. We see it take away and give back, and we see all of this in relation to land. And we may notice that flow is the relationship. It is the dynamic property of what may be the most essential and contrasted material relationship within our experience. It is the interface between elemental forces; ocean and land, river and mountain. It is where erosion meets resistance, hard meets soft, still meets fluid, and where tawny-colored sand meets deep blue water. (p. 208)

Perceiving relations stimulates our senses, which may be named individually but are actually a neuro-community in action, synaptic adventures roiling through the body. Sight becomes color becomes shape becomes motion becomes feeling, perhaps joy, perhaps fear, perhaps a little of both, and more. Perceiving the omnipresence of these multiple relations in Nature is awareness without restraint.

**Perceptual flexibility.** Synesthesia is described as a “neurological condition” in which an individual “suffers” from undifferentiated sense cross-referencing, such as tasting sound or hearing color. It is considered outside the realm of “normal” in which sound is exclusively heard and color is only seen. Unfortunately, “normal” describes a less flexible, colorful, tasteful,

sonorous, sensuous, interconnected world. However, “evolution has designed our brains so that our senses work together” (Yidirim, 2011, p. 3) and scientists are studying brain scans that reveal “humans have the neural mechanism for synesthesia but it's suppressed” (Than, 2011, para.13). Perceptual flexibility defies the preference for highly differentiated senses. It unifies “cross-sensory” participation in the biosphere, “in which the magic of the visible world is revealed by relinquishing one’s expectations and nurturing a vision of freshness” (Sewall, 1995, p. 210). It can apply to a multitude of ways we “see” the unitive relationships around us, such as faces in mountainsides, rivers in raindrops, melody in a creek, and time in a tree.

**Reperceiving depth.** We are taught to see the world that is in front of us because that is where our eyes are. Depth perception is technically the ocular ability to see in three dimensions and distance. This is called objectified depth. It’s very useful because it helps us not to bump into things. Yet our bodies are not just on the planet Earth. We are also integrated with the embracing, interactive biosphere of earth as well as events outside the biosphere in the cosmos, such as the orbit of Earth around the sun, the moon’s affect on the night sky, the conjunctions of planets, perhaps even the movement of constellations. We experience the world from all sides of our bodies, with all senses simultaneously, and we continually process what has meaning and what doesn’t. Sewall describes depth as “our experience in both time and space, lived and made meaningful by the further deepening of events into experiences, the primary activity of the soul” (1999a, p.168). The example she gives to show how depth becomes a qualitative spiritual experience lies in the concept of the horizon.

The horizon embraces us in its surround and weaves this place and this moment with

what is still withheld, yet to be discovered. The horizon holds together the near and the far, the present and the future. The horizon is thus a visible archetype, both holding and signifying great depth of experience. As lived experience, in an embodied and attentive moment, the horizon, like a mantra, shows us that each step we take changes our relationship with the future. As a visible mantra, the horizon reminds us of the power of choice. (1999a, p. 168)

I can think of many other natural phenomena that can inspire that layered depth perspective: canyons, constellations, tornados, bee hives, mammalian birth, and more.

**Imaginal self.** The final skill of ecological perception is the unquantifiable imagination. Within this skill, I find a synthesis of all the other four: attention, relations, flexibility, depth.

Rekindling this ability requires the active engagement of one's imagination and includes taking time to lie on a soft floor, on a bed of moss, or covered in silky sand. With practice, one's ability to imagine becomes colorful, vivid, creative, and emotionally provocative, thus enriching and influencing our psychological experience. (1995, p. 214)

For Sewall, Nature speaks through all activities of the cosmos, and our wondrous human sensory systems are poised to hear and respond. The interaction between the imaginal self and the experience of the senses "is reciprocal and co-creative" (Sewall, 1999b, p. 20).

As I examine Sewall's skills of ecological perception, my senses feel poised and eager to explore. I call the dogs, throw on a coat, and walk out into the night. When I return, I recall the intensity of my experience.

### **Self-dialogue of an experience with my imaginal self**

*I am walking through the wide-open San Luis Valley of southern Colorado at night. The blustery cold makes me pay attention. Gazing up at the clearest night sky, I see a depth I have*

*not witnessed from my home in the city for many months. I am enjoying the relations between the canines I love who are walking with me in a state of joy because variety and mystery have enlivened their olfactory senses. What do I feel? My cheeks are chilly, my hands feel hearth-warm in my pockets, and my breath has shape. I look up and visually fall into the fathomless Milky Way. My body becomes tiny. The shooting stars make me gasp. I reflect on the trick of light: many of these stars are already deceased, allegedly nonexistent. But I see them, feel their beauty, especially their beauty as part of the array. Reality becomes flexible. I imagine I am a speck; the Earth is a speck. There are no limits to the vista. What other perception enters my senses? I feel the emotional night and encounter my own longing. I am a participant in the cosmos and I miss knowing it and feeling it every day. The sky gives my body memory of the night sky's necessity in my life and my power of choice. It is a moment of remembrance, anamnesis. I come home and write this. I have re-perceived depth, and it inspires my imaginal self.*

As mentioned in the Introduction, the prefix “eco” comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning home. Spirit derives from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath. Rather than causing a diminishment of meaning, words sometimes capture exactly what is meant. For Abram, Jensen, Macy, Brown, Davis, Snyder, Sewall, Spretnak, Costigan, Sewall, and others, ecospirituality is the experience and practice of breathing with our home. Home is Nature; breath is our body. Phillip Costigan ties together this co-creative partnership: “Ecospirituality has the potential to bring together spirituality’s capacity for reverence and wonder with ecology’s capacity to explore and describe the reality of nature” (p. 41). And physical nature is the next stop on this

exploration of literature that informs my quest to find how the wild writer experiences Nature. “Mud and verbs. Breath one into the other and you stumble into a tiny Genesis” (Urrea, 1999, p. 4).

### *Nature*

After all my investigations into the truth and character of physical nature, I have learned that both nature and Nature are vast beyond my full comprehension. In general, the mind’s capacity to categorize, compartmentalize, define, and manipulate nature is not comparable to Nature’s immense multiplicity. Nature and our ability to experience it are simultaneous works in progress. In the Earthly realm alone, biologist E.O Wilson acknowledges that: “probably fewer than 10 percent of the life forms are known to science, and fewer than 1 percent have been studied” (2007, p. 116). Wilson coined the term “biophilia” to place humans in their evolved synchronous relationship to nature. His concept, enlarged in his book by the same name (1984), asserts the intrinsic love of life that binds us to all other living beings. Wilson is a biologist and has a biologist’s joy of nature: “That it is possible to spend a lifetime in a magellanic voyage around the trunk of a single tree. That as the exploration is pressed, it will engage more things close to the human heart and spirit” (p. 22). Those matters of mind, heart, spirit, and senses evolved for survival over two million years, and Wilson reminds us with an element of sadness and irony: “the brain appears to have kept all its old capacities, its channeled quickness. We stay alert and alive in the vanished forests of the world” (p. 101).

While I am in general agreement with Wilson’s vision of essential biophilia, I struggle with his trust of science. As he says, we are alive but our elemental home is vanishing. He wrote:

It seems possible that the naturalist’s vision is only a specialized product of a biophilic

instinct shared by all, that it can be elaborated to benefit more and more people.

Humanity is exalted not because we are so far above other creatures, but because knowing them well elevates the very concept of life. (1984, p. 22)

Unfortunately, the exalted “knowing them well” perspective that is the business of science has benefited human consumption and greed to a far greater extent than it has benefited natural stability, and the planet is now in overload. Nature is in trouble. The Global Footprint Network reports: “Today humanity uses the equivalent of 1.5 planets to provide the resources we use and absorb our waste. This means it now takes the Earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year” (Global Footprint Network, 2012, para. 1). This chronic abuse occurs in ignorance of 90 percent of that which we are abusing.

The ecological writer by definition loves nature, fears its destruction, and writes with an intention to hear the voices from the broadest scope of Nature. Thus, I looked further into Wilson’s work to see how he evolved his concept of biophilia, human love of life. In his 2002 book called *The Future of Life*, he asks: “What have we overlooked about our [human] place in history? What are we neglecting and at the risk of forever losing? The answer most likely in the year 3000 is: much of the rest of life, and part of what it means to be a human being” (p.129).

In spite of our scientific technological dominance on the planet, we don’t truly grasp, much less control, the immensity of nature. “The creature at your feet dismissed as a bug or a weed,” says Wilson, “is a creation in and of itself. It has a name, a million-year history, and a place in the world” (2002, p. 131). What creations of nature will truly endure in spite of our potential upcoming human-caused mass extinction? Cockroaches, for example, have been on this



planet for 350 million years, having survived four mass extinctions. Fungi populated land about 1.3 million years ago and they participate in symbiotic relationships with other beings in a way that humans now “know” but don’t necessarily transmute into awe and wonder much less stewardship. For example, biologist Paul Stamets reveals how fungi’s mycelial cellular networks create soil and how they metabolize toxic waste and radioactivity (Stamets, 2005).

Wilson also tells us about the extraordinary relationship between fungi and leaf-cutter ants:

Through a unique step in evolution taken millions of years ago, the ants captured a fungus, incorporated it into the superorganism [the ant colony], and so gained the power to digest leaves. Or perhaps it was the other way around: perhaps the fungus captured the ants and employed them as mobile extension to take leaves in the moist underground chambers. In either case, the two now own each other and will never pull apart. (2002, p. 37)

If only humans could learn and practice such agricultural sustainability and to metabolize toxic wastes of our own creation, perhaps we would not be at the onset of the sixth mass extinction (Wilson, 2006, p. 91). Fortunately, this power of naturalists’ observations and the rise of ecological sciences have begun to sway some hearts and minds about the inherent value of nature. The question is, of course, whether stewardship at this stage can halt the arrogant exploitation of Earth and reverse the damage.

I am endlessly fascinated by Wilson’s books and often read them from cover to cover because of his intricate, loving descriptions of the lives of Earth’s biological creatures, especially insects. In spite of his reverence for the human-nature biological inseparability, however, his presumptions are sometimes cheeky, such as “No one in his right mind looks at a pile of dead

leaves in preference to the tree from which they fell” (1984, p. 84). When I read this, my thoughts went immediately to Sewall’s experiential skills of ecological perception with which I can see the relations, flexibility, depth, and imagination in the colors, scent, and nourishment in those “dead” leaves and follow Wilson’s own “magellanic voyage” around the base of the tree. The ecowriter’s perceptual experience may be a part of our collective magellenic voyage around the cosmic tree.

I ask myself why Wilson, such an expansive, experienced, joyful thinker and scientist, still centers the solutions to human domination over nature on the very cause of it: the way the human mind conflates knowledge and truth under the umbrella of science. In Derrick Jensen’s book *Dreams* (2011), Stanley Aronowitz, professor of sociology in the graduate school of City University of New York, offers an answer: “science has defined its methods as the only way to discover truth.” (p. 138). He also notes that “if science is truth, instead of merely one form of truth, then all other forms of truth—all philosophical truth, all ethical truth, all emotional, spiritual, relational, experiential truths—are devalued truth” (p. 135). In this sense, scientific truth does not strategically or symbolically participate in the very diversity it seeks to categorize, compartmentalize, define, and manipulate. In other words, nature’s multiple ways of being, communicating, evolving, and interrelating are devalued. Because of that devaluation, it can be difficult to reach for experience and comprehension of all-encompassing Nature.

There is fortunately another more inclusive concept of our inextricable love for nature that is inclusive of biological nature as well as Aronowitz’s other truths. Annalet van Swalkwyk (2011) calls this *ecophilia*.

This immersion [in other forms of truth] leads one to finding one's connection with nature, towards loving nature (*ecophilia*). This deep connection and oneness with nature is the spiritual and even mystical dimension of Deep Ecology. (p. 87)

An immersion in nature can trigger this ecophilic awakening. John Seed discovered ecophilia doing work in support of rainforests:

In struggling to protect the rainforests near my home, I found that the sense of "I am protecting the rainforest" changed into "I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking." What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. (Seed, 2011, para. 1)

Now, nearly 25 years since Seed wrote this, the inseparability of all things human and non-human in nature is a philosophical and practical movement named Deep Ecology.

Arne Naess, George Sessions, Bill Devall, David Rothenberg, and others (Katz, E., A. Light, & D. Rothenberg, 2000) are luminary thinkers and writers about evolving principles of deep ecology. In its expansive embrace of ethics, biodiversity, activism, emotions, poetics, and metaphysics, the deep ecological view of nature transcends the limitations of both scientific ecology, which focuses on how ecosystems work, and environmental activism, which attempts to alter the political, economic, and social institutions that contribute to the incremental destruction of life. Life for the deep ecologist, as well as the ecological writer, is understood in the broadest sense to include everything within interactive landscapes, waterways, regional systems, geological formations, molecular structures, atomic activities and particles, and cosmic entities and phenomena. For some, it includes even those ineffable spirits and sprites not commonly accepted as "real."

The primary founder of deep ecology was the late Arne Naess, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy from Oslo University. His perspective, however, was inspired by a multitude of forerunners with nature-centered worldviews, from the first peoples of the Earth to the 1960s “Ecological Revolution” (Sessions, 1995, p. ix). What also distinguished deep ecology from other environmental philosophies was the connection Naess made between the science of ecological systems and the ethical questions of being on the planet (or in the universe).

Naess made a critical distinction between “shallow” ecology and “deep” ecology (1973). Shallow ecology was narrowly concerned with the environmental issues that had detrimental effects on the well being of people, especially people in the developed world, such as the death of a lake or a toxic landfill near a school. In shallow ecology, the problem would be addressed in an ad hoc manner without needing more than a tactical change in human behavior. Put filters on the effluent from industrial polluters; move the landfill elsewhere, perhaps recycle some components of garbage. Elaborating on deep ecology, Naess wrote: “The aim of supporters of the deep ecology movement is not a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole civilization” (1989, p. 45), not primarily in biophilic service to humans and human survival but equally in service to all non-human beings.

It was not his intention to be exclusionary or superior to the efforts of anyone advocating for environmental reform. Nature needs everyone to act on its behalf. In the interest of explaining the core ideas of deep ecology and bringing together diverse players in various environmental movements, in 1984 Naess and George Sessions (on a camping trip, so the story goes) developed “The Platform Principles of the Deep Ecology Movement” (See Appendix B).

The first two principles speak to the primacy of nature:

1. The well being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realizations of these values and are also values in themselves. (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 45)

Principles three through eight are basically what follows from the first two in terms of needed cultural change, such as population control (see Appendix B). The ecowriter's foremost challenge is to experience and convey the first and second principles: the inherent value of each form and the intrinsic value of diversity of all forms in nature.

In challenging some values that arise from deep ecology, in *The Truth of Ecology* (2009), Dana Phillips rejects what he calls epiphanies “(1) that nature, which is refreshingly simple, is good; and (2) that culture, which is tiresomely convoluted, is bad; or (3) at least not so good as nature” (p. 3). Phillips finds this perspective too devotional and contrary to reality. “Things [in nature] are too richly determined: our categories cannot cope. We live in a mongrel world” (p. 30). Mongrels, in dogs or ecosystems, add hybrid vigor. And when was nature last left to its own devices? Stephen Budiansky (1995) points out: “After ten thousand years of breaking the soil, after a hundred thousand years of setting fire to the forests and the plains, after a million years of chasing game, human influence is woven through even what to our eyes are the most pristine landscapes” (p. 124).

In addition to our global footprint, however, multiple twists and turns of natural behavior have absolutely nothing to do with humans: floods, drought, meteors, earthquakes, tsunamis, continental drift, volcanic eruptions, species dominance and subservience, solar flares, eclipses,

and genetic mutations. Particularly relevant and exciting to the wild writer are these lessons from ecological science that nature is not simply peaceful and harmonious if left to its own ecosystemic devices. It changes constantly. Nature is vivid and dynamic. Components interact both predictably and randomly. It is often violent and destructive. Nature speaks quite emphatically for itself.

Writer Robinson Jeffers called this breadth of understanding about nature “the recognition of transhuman magnificence . . . a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man [sic]” (1977, p. xxi), which invalidates the very core of the anthropocentric worldview, which means thinking of human beings as the most central entity of the universe and/or regarding the universe mainly in terms of human values and experiences. Fortunately, studies are showing that diverse ecosystems do not just range in a linear hierarchy from simple to complex, with humans as the most complex because of our brain. Mysteries abound: How does inorganic life beget organic life and vice-versa (Fields, 2010). Why do entire habitats depend on simple fungi (Stamets, 2005)? How do plants show consciousness (Backster, 2003)? Ken Wilber calls these discrete yet individually whole components of Nature *holons*, and all holons in Nature are holarchically connected to all (2001, p. xiv). This is the pattern that unites otherwise “separate and isolated parts into a coherent unity, a space in which separated parts can recognize a common wholeness” (2007, p. 42).

The words “experiment” and “experience” come from the same Latin root, *experiens*, meaning to try thoroughly, to risk, to go through. Science lost that core meaning through reductionism, a no-risk strategy for building knowledge: one replicable thing at a time. Seeking

the nature of experience is full of risk because the outcome is vastly unknown. However, recognition of the mystifying complexity of all nature allows wild writers to engage in deep ecological wonder about both human and non-human experiences. Abram wants us to embed anew our stories in nature, to let our writing slip back into the realm of biophilia and ecophilia and deep ecology:

off the lettered page to inhabit these coastal forests, those desert canyons, those whispering grasslands and valleys and swamps . . . . Planting words, like seeds, under rocks and fallen logs—letting language take root, once again, in the earthen silence of shadow and bone and leaf. (1996, p. 272)

In other words, he asks us to allow writing to be informed by our most elemental experiences of nature.

Briefly leaving the “lettered page,” I inhabit the Valley with my wonder, and I discover my deeply ecophilic love and despair for this place.

### **Self-dialogue about an experience of nature in the San Luis Valley**

*This morning I watched the cool stratus clouds blow in from the southwest, the same winds that carry sand all the way to the 700-foot Great Sand Dunes at the base of Blanca Peak. Winds that blew across the inland sea 150 million years ago. Outside my window, now filtering sunlight, I see the dry alpine plain, mostly sand, pebbles, sage, chamisa, and juniper. I wonder about the Crustaceous era of magnificent creatures and flowering plants, most driven to extinction after a million-year dance on the surface of North America. Does the quiet and stillness of this valley—which I relish as an antidote to the high-strung city—foreshadow a human-driven mass extinction in process? There are few songbirds or small mammals in evidence. The feral horses have eaten the remaining grasses. Even a mere 200 years ago, the*

*valley was full of bison, elk, and antelope. Wolves, bear, and mountain lions. Now my dogs are the most visible predators, and the dozen ravens that perch on the stunted cottonwoods of dry Costilla Creek occasionally call each other to a promise of food hidden in the shrubs. On my walks, I see a few tiny prints of rodents, one lone coyote trail in the snow, a few zigzagging jackrabbits. None in abundance. My imagination takes hold: replant the grasses without the invasive grazers; find the right music and seed to invite the songbirds; draw the elk down from the juniper slopes of Ute Mountain. I see big cats saunter up from their lairs along the Rio Grande. The wolves trot to the running creek, bellies full of mice and rabbit. A fox runs through sage like a contra dancer. Prairie dogs poke their heads out to announce, "Morning. Morning. Fox!" Yesterday I read that there is more life underground than above. There are bacteria, fungi, single cell miracles, bugs, and multiple worm and slug creatures. I wish to be Alice falling into a hole in the dust, roll down as far as I need to find my sister and brother creatures, microscopic and macroscopic, vocal and silent. But I am not invited to this Queen's garden because my kind has squandered bounty and balance. Nature took an inexplicable turn by fostering the human mind, fostering the specialization of arrogance instead of synchronicity. We flatten and scourge. We offer no reciprocity like prairie dogs creating channels to feed rain to the aquifer; like buffalo turning the soil with a million hooves and fertilizing the plains with a million piles of dung; like birds calling out danger to all in their ecotone; like webs of fungi creating soil and sending nutrients to those flora far from the banks of the river; like the transformative brilliance of a vulture on a carcass.*

Fortunately, nature is more resilient than my self-dialogue suggests. Evolutionary



biologist Elisabet Sahtouris in “Celebrating Crisis” reminds us:

Theoretical physics suggests that ancient consciousness-based Eastern cosmologies are more accurately descriptive of our universe than the Western science story—that the universe is not meaningless matter but rooted in living consciousness, not running down but recreating itself instant by instant. Best of all, we [humans] are co-creators in this scheme, not victims of blind fateful forces. (2011, p. 11)

In addition, she points out that geneticists have learned that evolution is advanced as much by stress as random mutation and that nature is “on our side in a grand learning process” (2011, p. 12). In spite of five mass extinctions, life endures. In spite of our arrogance, humans cannot destroy the cosmos. “Life wants to live. Life so completely wants to live...our task is clear: to help life live” (Jensen, 2009, para. 10).

For a century or more, we have been inundated with this devastating story of environmental degradation. The destruction has escalated exponentially in the first decade of the 21st century, and “to be conscious in our world today is to be aware of vast suffering and unprecedented peril” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 26). Jungian analyst and global activist Jean Shinoda Bolen “encourages us to find the cause that has our name on it” (2011, p. 15). In the next section, I examine ways in which the wild writer’s tool, talent, and “assignment” simply to speak truth-to-nature (Baetens, 2008, para. 4) are born from experience of Nature.

### *Story*

Observing, reading, storytelling, cultivating literary craft, and commitment are the literary instruments of planetary awareness. *How* wild writers experience Nature is the source of this awareness and the foundation for fulfilling our literary assignment. David Peterson, in his

guide to nature writing (2001), believes in the requirement “to write true, well, and accurately about nature: *While I could live without writing, I could never live without the things I write about*” (p. 9). Humans quite literally could not live without nature; indeed, we are nature embodied as humans. Yet Peterson meant something deeper: “Why write about nature? *For the love of nature and the writing process, in that order*” (p. xiii).

In the same vein, nature writer John Murray (2001) wrote: “We only have to look outside to find something worthy of our devotion and love” (p. viii). By articulating the intrinsic worth and interrelatedness of all things, wild writing becomes part of the family of discoveries that helps all humans traverse the living bridge to Nature, initiating what Wesley Schultz (2000) calls “biospheric” perspective, or “environmental concern based on a desire to gain rewards for all living things or to avoid harmful consequences for the biosphere” (p. 394). A deep ecological biospheric perspective encourages the writer to become a significant witness for all elements of the cosmos and express its components, events, and aesthetics from Nature’s point of view.

Point of view is not necessarily the same thing as voice. Nature’s perspective, or point of view, may be conveyed through human metaphorical voice without losing its core Nature-centered truth. However, because writing is a human tool for use between humans, it is important to make a distinction between anthropomorphic and anthropocentric points of view.

Anthropomorphism means interpreting what is not human in terms of human or qualities. For example, as measured by a pioneer in the field of primary perception, Cleve Backsters (2003), plants have extreme polygraph reactions to the anticipation of burning, and this reaction might be anthropomorphically called *fear*. In another example, to say the earth *suffers* because of water

pollution conveys an emotion that humans can relate to. To suffer means to experience something bad or unpleasant. Water pollution kills aquatic creatures and humans, and that is bad and unpleasant.

Anthropocentrism is human-centered thinking. Here is an example of a human-centered commentary on nature: “With global climate disruption...we are throwing away *the things most beautiful and meaningful to us* [emphasis added]...predictable seasons, weather we can trust, polar bears, coastlines, entire islands, permafrost, glaciers” (Ray, 2011, p. 16). While ecowriters may use anthropomorphic language in the interest of vivid communication, they search for entwined relational understanding between humans and the rest of life, representing the first principle of deep ecology: the value of human and non-human life independent of usefulness for human purposes. In other words, global climate change is meaningful to polar bears, glaciers, weather, and islands for their own intrinsic sakes. This is the perspective of deep ecology and the opposite of anthropocentrism.

The ecological writer also seeks a wild, untapped, untamed intention and expression in literature; untamed in the way our perceptions are untamed by experiencing, listening, and communing with the non-human world. By moving place—and everything in it—from background to foreground, conveying the primacy of “evocative sounds, shapes, and gestures of the surrounding ecology” (Abram, 1996, p. 139), the writer affirms the interconnectedness of human and non-human, gives the non-human equal instead of subordinate value, and provides the non-human a voice. Since we literally do not speak the language of trees, water, kangaroo rats, viruses, and so on, anthropomorphism serves as a technique, because “vivid detail is the life blood” (Gardner, 1991, p. 16) of powerfully effective stories. A perfect example of this can be found in biologist E.O. Wilson’s novel, *Anthill* (2010a).

In a January 18, 2010, interview with *The New Yorker* writer Deborah Treisman, Wilson says, “I wanted to try something I don’t believe any novelist has ever done, and that’s describe the natural world as it actually is, in fine detail” (2010, 1). He wanted to make the endangered old-growth forest “of equal importance” as the human world and the main character (ibid.). His intention was to “show what that kind of existence looks like to the ants themselves” (2010, p. 2) based on his decades of experience of ants as an entomologist.

In an excerpt from *Anthill* published in the January 25, 2010 issue of *The New Yorker*, Wilson describes the death of the queen of the Trailside Colony:

She simply sat on the floor of the royal Chamber and died. As in life, her body was prone and immobile, her legs and antennae relaxed. Her stillness alone failed to give warning to her daughters that a catastrophe had occurred for all of them . . . . Her quietude said nothing, and the odors of her life, still rising from her, signaled, I remain among you. She smelled alive. (2010b, para. 1)

Knowing that biologist Wilson is telling us what happens in the real world of ants makes this story all the more poignant. “His evocation of [ant ways] is a more powerful tool for raising ecological awareness than any Disneyfication is likely to be” (“The Secret Life Of Ants: It’s A Bug’s Life,” 2010, para. 9). Wilson’s fully actualized skills of ecological perceptions opened him up to imagining a story that revealed the voices of a complex emotive insect world, letting details cross the page like the little bugs that have been his lifelong muse.

So how do wild writers construe stories that encompass the grand sweep of human and non-human experience? First, humans are not outside of Nature. This is a fundamental principle

of deep ecology, and wild writers reflect this in their creative output that foregrounds place. Wild writing reflects an experience of the “mongrel world ” as much as ecology does. This hybrid quality of Nature can be illuminated in many, many different kinds of stories.

Martin Prechtel (2001) describes this perspective on the Mayan Tzutujil storytelling: Mayan stories are like water. To the Tzutujil there is only one water which rushes, puddles, or is captured in a multitude of diverse forms like plant leaves, hot springs, rivers, lakes, ponds, ice, tears and streams, and like the amniotic fluid at our births, all this water is trying to get back home to the original mother of life, the great Grandmother Ocean, the great dream pool. (2005, p. 4)

The challenge to the writer is to address ecological concerns without losing this sense of story magic, without engaging in polemicist eco-rhetoric that dunks the reader in the dream pool.

While I use the word *story* to mean all writing, speaking of fiction John Gardener says, “In bad or unsatisfying fiction, this fictional dream is interrupted from time to time by some mistake or conscious ploy on the part of the artist” (1991, p. 97). The ecowriter has the permission, perhaps the responsibility, to play fluidly with the text or subtext of her or his experience of bewildering, unpredictable Nature, including human nature, in order to sustain the trance.

David Abram says, “Writing is a curious endeavor, swerving from moments of splendid delirium into others of stunned puzzlement” (2010, p. 10). The wild writer has to overcome the tendency of literate culture to write *about* nature rather speak *with* it. Distance from the subject creates the puzzlement and entangles language. Experience of the wild (or the green) rekindles a bond with the natural world and creates a splendidly delirious bridge of wild voices from nature to self, and self to other through writing.

Zinsser posed a question I believe is a critical one for the ecowriter: What do we discover through the act of writing that “we wouldn’t learn any other way?” (p. 41) Arne Naess’s first of the eight principles of deep ecology asserts the “inherent value” of all things in nature with or without the presence of humans. When he wrote this in 1973, a hot debate ensued about whether the human mind is truly capable of connecting with that inherent value and conveying the total “creative imagination of the Earth” (Katz & Rothenberg, 2000, p. 14). Wild writing begins with the premise that we can both connect and convey the voices of nature, but the “usefulness [of an experience] diminishes to the extent you can’t articulate it to someone else” (Zinsser, p. 49). Or put more positively, writing “forces us to keep asking, ‘Am I saying what I want to say?’” (p. 49).

Speaking for the Earth in the spirit of deep ecology demands an especially articulate voice. Understanding inherent value is not a simple cognitive process. If ecological writers simply intellectualize the right of the tree or waterfall or molecule to exist, they miss the point because intellectualizing is anthropocentric, which tends to be linear rather than holarchical (Wilber, 2007).

When all sensory systems of the writer experience the multiple voices within nature—moonlight, rock uplifts, humming hummingbird, decomposing leaves, centipedes, fog, comets, or other infinite natural phenomena—Nature can come to its side of the communication bridge. Ecowriters stand on both sides, inseparable from the whole, but to write about it they cross back over into the more confined realm of human communication and transmute non-verbal experience into threads of discourse full of visceral wonder. David Abram captures this process

exquisitely after watching spiders spin webs across the mouth of an Indonesian cave:

It was from them I first learned of the intelligence that lurks in nonhuman nature, the ability that an alien form of sentience has to echo one's own, to instill a reverberation in oneself that temporarily shatters habitual ways of seeing and feeling, leaving one open to the world all alive, awake, and aware." (1996, p. 19)

To fully unfold the experiential story from nature, the eco-writer begins crafting and asking, "What did I see and feel? What piece is missing? What piece needs more depth? What piece did not come from nature but came from my mind?" until words express the experience with the utmost human verbal clarity. Similar to the process of interpreting a dream, the writer will come closer to the subject, not farther away.

One branch of ecocriticism called the *ecosublime*, in Lee Rozelle's book by the same name (2006), delves into the experiential convergence of story and reader—and, by extension, the wild writer—such that intense engagement with Nature is sustained:

Ecosublimity can thus be thought of as the awe and terror that occurs when literary figures *experience* [emphasis added] the infinite complexity and contingency of place....

It recalls crucial links between human subjects and the non-human world. (p. 1)

Rozelle articulates three stages by which this happens to an individual: first, apprehension in the face of the vastness of the natural world; second, awe when the relative weakness of self and the greatness of nature are recognized; and three, identification between the self and all of the natural world (pp. 2-3). These are visceral experiences of the individual. As an ecowriter, it's my special task to find the wild inside and outside me and express the web of wild universal relations I experience—from tactile to cosmic—through the precision and lyricism of human language.

Nature, expressed through many channels including ecospirituality, biophilia, ecophilia,

deep ecology, and ecopsychology, becomes the foreground of the ecowriter's story. Rita Felski (2008) names four aspects of literature that reflect the transformative qualities of apprehension, awe, and identification with Nature: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. Each is instructive for the wild writer who wants to convey the experience of Earthly and other-than-Earthly affairs through writing. Felski admits these forms of engagement "are more truthfully described as messy, blurred, compounded, and contradictory" (p. 132). Just like ecology! Just like Nature! Just like human nature! Briefly, Felski's four messy forms are:

**Recognition** is to recognize oneself in a story. I, the reader and writer, "may be looking for such a moment, or I may stumble on it haphazardly, startled by the prescience of a certain combination of words. In either case, I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account" (Felski, 2008, p. 23). This summoning is like the ecosublime condition of apprehension in which "Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something that I did not see" (p. 23), and this "fervent self-scrutiny" (p. 24) is uncomfortable.

This reader/writer participation in the ecosublime recognition is not just an aspect of fiction. Returning to Carney's research on women's Fire Ceremony, she asked her co-researchers to document their ecospiritual experiences in journals.

The texts produced by the Fire sisters were memoirs of an experience of a life moment filled with rich and emotionally resonant poetic imagery, powerful affective symbols, and an intensity of focus and determination to grow and learn and change. They can be seen as personally verified human templates that others can work from as they attempt to realize their own dreams and longings, as they search for their own life's significance and



meaning, because like myth, a memoir deals with human issues of ultimate concern.  
(2007, p. 337)

In other words, the memoirs of the Fire Sisters experiencing themselves and the Earth (p. 27) ultimately foster recognition and identification.

**Enchantment** is a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so caught up in suspension of disbelief and surrender that nothing else matters (Felski, 2008, p. 51). It is a visceral experience in which the writer or reader is no longer “other.” In Terry Tempest Williams’ words, “story allows us to enter through the backdoor” (in Satterfield and Slovic, 2004, p. 74) of consciousness. Furthermore, in addition to being a psychological response, enchantment is a perceptual phenomenon in which “We can truly begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience” (p. 76). Enchantment means storytelling takes on a life of its own.

**Knowledge** embedded in the story reveals something about the way things are in the world beyond the self. It reveals information about “people and things, mores and manners, symbolic meanings and social stratification” (Felski, 2008, p. 83). Wild writers are not necessarily informed naturalists like Wilson but, as Barry Lopez says in his essay “Landscape and Narrative”: “We derive a sense of confidence ... not so much from verifiable truth as from an understanding that lying has played no role in the narrative (1989, p. 66). John Gardner agrees:

An important part of what interests us in good fiction is our sense, as we read, that the writer’s imitation of reality’s process...is accurate; that is, our feeling that the work, even if it contains fabulous elements, is in some deep way “true-to-life.” (1991, p. 51)

Even though there may be nuances to ecological truths, our words are “tangled up with our

embeddedness in the world” (Felski, 2008, p. 86). The ecowriter articulates the voices of Nature based on “true” experience.

**Shock** is literature’s power to disturb. Modern humans are inundated with shocking content in all forms of art and popular culture. It often has the effect of desensitizing the visceral experience of horror rather than catalyzing remedial action. Story’s shock is more muted:

Our sense of equilibrium is destroyed; we are left at sea, dazed and confused, fumbling for words, unable to piece together a coherent response. Woven out of variegated strands of revulsion, horror, and disbelief, shock can temporarily disable both mind and body. And while its immediate effects may quickly dissipate, the after-shocks can reverberate in the psyche for some time; the suddenness of the initial impact is succeeded by an extended, delayed, or belated array of psychic or somatic reactions. (Felski, 2008, p. 113)

The shock response is a bodily one, and this is critical for the ecowriter dealing with any shocking subject or event. Scott Slovic says:

To place special emphasis on the startling, sometimes even desperate, *unpredictability* of the natural world... The emotional result is disgust, horror, annoyance, surprise, and almost always (at least in retrospect) satisfaction with the intensity of the experience. (Slovic in Golfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. 356)

The somatic reflexes are intensely “natural” and experiential: gag, gasp, tears, flinching, goose bumps, chills, nervous laughter, quickened heart rate, and so on. The senses ground the reader in nature.

These four literary affects parallel Lee Rozelle’s trajectory through the ecosublime

(2006): apprehension is like recognition, sometimes born of the knowledge imparted in the narrative. Awe and terror are like enchantment and shock. Finally, these psychological and somatic experiences have the collective potential to lead to the ecosublime consequence of identification with the whole natural world through story.

Identification is also a critical process in the emergence of a heuristic study (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 15-16), in this case, a study about the experience of Nature. I, as an ecological writer, do not simply walk the San Luis Valley as a participant/observer of place. The engagement sparks my identification with this place and are reborn in the mystery of creativity: a story.

### **Self-dialogue of an imaginative experience of Wolf Mountain**

*Below the mountain, my den sits in a valley that is bereft of my kind. It is a carpet of sage, sand, cloud, shadows, and pebbles woven together by skittish ravens, overseen by the outline of an immense wolf that watches me in wait. Not stalking, yet the animal's gaze is so silent I cannot ignore it. Its shape has no detail from my spot on the foothill, no eyes or nostrils, and its fur is just a ragged forest of stunted pinyon and junipers. The arched summit suggests shoulders hunched up behind its neck. It faces me and watches and waits. The two sides of the Canis forehead, jawline, and snout are defined by two long curvaceous swaths of snow in the middle of the north slope above my hole in the desert. The forelegs are steep ridges running down the mountain on either side of his head.*

*Each morning I gaze up at it from the opening of my den, so puzzled by its intention. I can only arrange its quest within my own. The wolf's mountain is shaped like a bell with me, perhaps its clapper, poking out at the base, the only moveable part. But I am still because all I know is lost. I am lost.*

*This morning I roll out from my underground bed of grasses. The dawn sky is pale and*

*cloudless. My face feels tight and my eyes swollen. A dream has plagued me all night. In a twisted nightmare of the End, I find my dog dead outside my door, tongue hanging, eyes a portent of what might become of me. A thin black smoke covers the neighborhood. Then it is not my dog but this mountain wolf, with two swaths of white fur on each side of its face. In the dream I touch the fur with my fingertips and then curl his still supple body into a fetal position in the corner of the porch, stroke his silken alert ears, and whisper that I have heard his warning.*

*In truth, when I awoke the morning of the End, I had no dog. The smoke was true, though. It made me gag but thrust me into action. Now the dream fills me with the same drive. It is chilly outside, but my undernourished muscles hold just enough energy to get me up the mountain. I wrap my worn sleeping bag, a few shreds of clothing, my bowl, and a tattered notebook in my old rucksack and tuck it into the deepest reach of the hole. I pull on my dirty jean jacket, grab my water bottle, and head to the old trail that switchbacks up the mountain. A few hundred feet up this unused animal byway, a spring drips clear water from one small pile of stones down into another. I fill my bottle. I have never walked on for fear of being too far from my den. Now I am certain I am utterly alone. Only a few rodents and insects visit me; tiny mushrooms share the walls of my hole. But I want something more.*

*By the time the sun is three hand-widths up in the sky, the trail enters the scrubby evergreen forest. I turn and look back down into the wide valley. I have to turn my head from shoulder to shoulder to see it all, bordered by rounded ancient volcanoes to the west and a long craggy snow-covered mountain range along the east. In the north is a single peak enshrouded by clouds, immeasurably distant.*

*I move on into the forest. My sloth-like footsteps crunch on the trail until I emerge from the trees. Swaths of snow flow to the left and right around trees of fur. This is the wolf's snout, which I now see has a nose of black rock as big as a cabin.*

*Since I haven't talked for months, opening my voice does not seem the way to talk with the wolf. Instead, I sniff the dark stone nose. What now? I wonder my question.*

*Cool mineral air seeps from the rock. An answer bursts into my mind before I can censor it with reason. What before?*

*I put my hand to the pocket of my jacket where I keep the stub of my last pencil. I shake my head. I have no more paper.*

*You have eyes. You have ears.*

*I shake my head again. What good are eyes in emptiness?*

*It is not empty.*

*What good are ears in a silent desert?*

*It is not silent.*

*What good am I in a dying world?*

*You are story.*

*A sob rises in my throat, a sob I have oppressed since the End. But it rises up in revolt of my control, and I finally weep with my eyes closed and my cheek pressed against the cool rock. My tears moisten the wolf's black nose.*

*When I finally lift my head, the sun is setting. I ache not to leave the only being I have known in months, but as usual, my fear propels me back to my den. With one last stroke of the gracious snout, I turn down the trail, entrenched in despair.*

*When the path leaves the trees, I stop to catch my breath, sit, and let my trembling legs*

*rest, Across the valley, all is silent, all is still. But there? Something is backlit by the sunset, along the rim of the western volcano. Three four-leggeds. In motion. One with antlers.*

*I hold my breath. They move slowly. But I have eyes.*

The very tenets of ecology evolve with each new study, each newly endangered species, each degree of global warming, and each sign of resilience in an ecosystem. Every story also reaches for the confluence of place and culture, with inroads to the story landscape that are as varied as human experience. The heuristic study that follows examines the wild writer's experience of Nature that is food for the literary imagination. What artistic liberation it is to know we can wander Nature with impunity and then, as poet Gregory Orr (2005) wrote,

Let's remake the world with words.

Not frivolously, nor

To hide from what we fear,

But with a purpose.

(p. 98)

## Heuristic Methodology: Truth-to-Nature

### Frame of Reference

How does the wild writer experience Nature? I cannot approach my question from an omniscient, distanced point of view. I am not “other” in the study process any more than I am “other” in Nature. Heuristic methods are perfect for my inquiry because they require my full participation, my experience. Heuristic research is characterized by an unfolding investigation into key elements of a human experience, in this case the ecological writer’s experience of Nature. Natalie Gulsrud writes that “Experiences are the threads that weave life together and the stories that we all can relate to” (2002, p. 8). The “truth” of the experiences of Nature as related by my co-researchers and me are varied, paradoxical, perhaps even contradictory, but through the heuristic process, our knowledge, our truth-to-nature (Baetens, 2008, para. 4), is expanded as our experiential realms are illuminated (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11).

In the pursuit of the thread that weaves the experiences of wild writers together, I devotedly followed the six phases of this methodology as presented by Moustakas in *Heuristic Research* (1990): Initial Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, Creative Synthesis (pp. 27-32). Within these phase I am fully engaged in the processes of identification, focusing, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, and indwelling (pp. 15-26). Because I am a wild writer committed to “total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity” (p. 14), each step of this heuristic inquiry is also my process of discovering “new images and meanings” (p. 9) relevant to my experience of Nature and the personal “transformation that exists as a possibility in this heuristic journey” (p. 14).

## Initial Engagement

### *Identification*

“Self-directed search” characterizes my ability to get “inside the question” (p. 15). I have loved being outdoors my whole life, yet I became deeply aware of the indelible experience of wild nature at the age of 58 when I hiked a very difficult trail to Windy Pass.

The dazzling and endless mountain ranges pulled feeling from so deep in my body that tears tumbled from my eyes... I shed tears, too, because in every way I had slid off the trail of my casual intention to take a beautiful walk on my birthday. My chest opened and exhaled, releasing a promise for the next few decades of my life. I began a new conversation with my body and new purpose for my evolving spirit. (Green, 2010, p. 25)

My experience of nature as revealed in this passage—tears, exhale, awareness of my body, a sense of conversation—inspired me to go home and write the rough beginnings of *Trail Writer’s Guide* (2010). I then took individuals and groups into nature to write, using exercises from my book. I witnessed that my exercises generated something beyond a journal entry. The walks in nature seemed to open a portal of creativity. It wasn’t just me. The experience profoundly, creatively influenced others, too. At first, I wanted to evolve the most evocative writing prompts, but that was focused on writing and Nature from the outside in. I wanted to find the source of knowing Nature, namely the experiences of myself and others because “there is no substitute for experience, none at all. All the other paraphernalia of communication and of knowledge—words, labels, concepts, symbols, theories, formulas, sciences—are only useful only because people



already knew them experientially” (Maslow in Moustakas, 1990, p. 17).

### ***Focusing***

This initial identification with the question was the embryo of my focus on the source experiences of wild writers. I invited participants from SNS to discover their experiences with me as I engaged them in the taped informal conversations, read their writing samples, and followed up through ongoing communications about our experiences that had been “out of conscious reach” (p. 25).

In focusing on the literature, I rediscover the core themes that facilitate organizing the findings. Furthermore, this focus is the container for my sustained involvement with the experience of Nature. Each element of my life, from opening the blinds to the morning sun to the facial expressions of friends in conversation to the alignment of Venus and Jupiter in the night sky make me ask, “How am I experiencing this aspect of Nature?”

### ***Tacit knowing***

Tacit knowing is the process of allowing vague understandings, experiences, feelings, and thoughts rise to the surface of awareness (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 20-22). More than just rising, though, it is also about respecting and incorporating that information into “untapped directions and sources of meaning” (p. 22). Simply acknowledging that Nature has voices is not enough. It is important to perceptually explore the experience of those voices: not just mine, not just human’s, not just Nature’s, but also the ecotonal interactions between them. As the primary researcher, I “grope in the darkness but there are flashes of light” (p.22) about the ecowriter’s experience of Nature.

Those flashes of light happen to me more often the longer I engage in the heuristic process. Just looking out the window now allows previously unacknowledged relationships to

rise to the surface.

### **Self-dialogue about an experience of parallel worlds**

*Outside, the morning's comforter of clouds has become a blizzard. Snow blowing parallel to the Earth; or perhaps Earth is turning slowly, parallel to the storm. Today is a Sunday. I feel sloth-time enveloping my body. Rest day. My thesis vision calls, though; or my mind's eye calls my thesis. I am not setting boundaries between possibilities of influence. Is this the ecotone, the transition environments between ecowriter's immersion, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, and intuition? Oh, the blizzard is now blowing without snowflakes. No longer the partner dance I expected.*

### ***Intuition***

“Every act of achieving integration, unity, or wholeness of anything requires intuition” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23). I trust that conjoining the three themes of spirit, nature, story not only creates a dynamic writing environment and organizes my literature review, but it also nurtures a whole picture of how the wild writer experiences Nature. Intuition is particularly relevant for a study of a writer's experience because, as Gardner believes, the writer proceeds from intuition and feeling “sometimes writing in a thoughtless white heat of ‘inspiration’, drawing on his [sic] unconscious, trusting his [sic] instincts” (1991, p. 69).

### ***Indwelling***

During this time on the wild plains of the San Luis Valley, I reflect on my experiences of Nature. I follow them like clues, dwelling inside them—indwelling—expanding “their meanings

and associations until [hopefully] insight is achieved” (p. 24).

Each morning, I retreat from the concentrated focus on the question and engage in an ecospiritual ritual, through which I seek a sense of unity with the wild. I begin each day with a personal medicine shield practice inspired by practices of Foster and Little in *The Trail to Sacred Mountain* (2009), Joanna Macy and Molly Brown in *Coming Back to Life* (1998), and Carol Parker, PhD., on a June 2011 Vision Quest in the Jemez mountains of Northern New Mexico. After I open my circle with incense and rattle, I summon the counsel of the four directions and various animal guides at a small altar. Then I listen in silence, receptive to an open-ended conversation with the voices of the non-human world. As they so choose to speak with me, so I attempt to represent them as part of my experience of nature.

After I close the ritual circle, I walk in the San Luis Valley at the base of Ute Mountain. I am fully attentive to my surroundings, thus, receiving direct sensory feedback through ongoing immersion with wild nature. My two dogs accompany me. I watch their responses to an unfettered experience of this environment. They run far afield and then return to my side, making eye contact, telling me of their discoveries in canine body language. Each walk renews and adds to my personal wild writer’s experience of nature: animal tracks, volcanic stone, night sky, an etching of spirit wolf on the face of the mountain, skeletons of long dead creatures, the flow of one river, the dry emptiness of the other, wild pinto ponies, ravens, ducks, geese, critters I only know by their tiny, tiny footprints, the Milky Way free of the shroud of urban lights.

### **Self-dialogue of the experience of indwelling in the San Luis Valley**

*The dogs bounded and I strode up one of the many horse paths to a rise. I ruminated on the over-grazing that has partially caused the arid conditions on the plain surrounded by Ute, San Antonio, Blanca, and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Some of the fault is due to wild*

*horses, some to the abuse of open-range by ranchers. My neighbor, AJ, came here four years ago with 150 horses that he set free. They trampled everybody's land, ate every shred of grass, became like a swarm of giant annoying bugs. The animals looked too lean and unkempt and kept breeding, so someone called the ASPCA, and AJ had to cut his herd to 40 horses.*

*When I wander the hills, I have been torn between wanting to see the horses and agreeing that they are large pests because now there is grass nowhere and horse shit everywhere. But I loved horses as a child, first on TV, then riding lessons, then a horse of my own when I lived in Mexico. They were my first intuitive engagement with animals, though not always congruent because horses can be quite ornery, fickle, and uncooperative... as can I. Here I'd like to experience a connectivity with these semi-feral beasts should we cross paths.*

*Did the thought manifest the encounter? On my next indwelling walk, two days ago, I saw a small herd of AJ's horses, maybe 1/4 mile in the distance. They never let the dogs and me get any closer. Although I tried to follow them, they always kept that 1/4 mile out of reach. Yesterday, as we walked up the hill, we saw them in a nearby flat area, munching who-knows-what. Sage? Chamisa? Prickly pear cactus? Volcanic stones? They raised their heads, one by one, and stopped eating to gaze at our approach. I called the dogs close to me, and to my surprise, they obeyed. I stopped. There were about a dozen animals, mostly pintos, and two foals. Slowly the equines began to wander toward us, first one, then two, then all. The hair rose on my neck. The dogs and I just stood there until the horses were about 50 feet away. They lined up; ears pricked in our direction, two foals behind their mothers. White faces, brown faces, broad chests, healthy rumps, stars, blazes, stockings. We stood like that for several minutes. Then by*

*some un-whinnied agreement, they decided to come closer. My dogs were still, floppy ears pricked. My comfort and trust level breached when the horses were about 20-feet away, I lifted my arms up and down, and called, "Shoo." They stopped, necks low, easy in their bodies. Then suddenly a chunky black & white came galloping from the west to catch up with its herd. The others watched it coming and, by some message on the wind, caught the spirit of flight, turned to join the black & white, and all galloped off to the north with tails arched and manes flying. The mythic glory of horses, embodied symbol of speed and freedom. That's when the canines caught the magic, leapt into hot pursuit, as if reminded, "Oh yes! I'm also a wolf!" I turned toward the river to continue my walk, to dwell on this experience of animal nature: the curious in the feral. The dogs stopped and gazed from me to horses, to each other, and back. By their unspoken agreement, they decided that being canine wasn't so bad, that perhaps I held more promise of adventure than swiftly fleeing equines.*

I return from my immersion in wild nature and write in the journal I call my Cairn Journal (with a photograph of a cairn on the cover). In its shape and its construction of stone, a cairn represents a symbolic mountain and the invisible, tacit knowing that connects one peak to another, as a spider threads a web. It also specifically marks the trail that a pilgrim/traveler traverses into the wild. Thus, the spontaneous writing in my Cairn Journal is a wild literary journey of ongoing self-dialogues (included throughout the thesis) about my experiences of Nature that link my invisible, tacit, soulful participation in this environment with my conscious verbal mind.

I also consider this thesis as an indwelling in story. I am writing with the full authenticity of my immediate experience of Nature and sometimes the "white heat" of inspiration (Gardener, 1991, p. 69).

**Incubation**

I leave the concentrated focus of the thesis writing retreat and individual depictions to visit Santa Fe, NM, for a few days, make meals, read novels, and/or ramble with the dogs along the site of the ancient inland sea. I let the evolving information about my co-researchers' experiences of nature find their "imaginal cells" (Sahtouris, 2012) of transformation in the larva of our experiences.

These times of incubating play allow me to experience a kind of "fusion with the world" (Maslow, 1971, pp. 65, 70) and indulge in a bit of self-forgetfulness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.43).

**Self-dialogue on an experience walking along the Rio Grande Bluffs**

*Every day I walk to the edge of the 50-foot cliffs overlooking the Rio Grande. One intention has been to watch the flow of water as the ice breaks up in the warming weather. The visual flow inspires my literary flow. I've also seen geese heading north and, today, black and white ducks floating in an open eddy. The dogs trotted around until we got near the rocky edge. Growing amongst the black porous volcanic stones are intensely thorny ground cacti. The dogs have to tiptoe or put paws on one stone then another, until we're back on the horse trails leading away from the water. For the first time I noticed several three-foot wooden stakes along the edge of the cliffs over the river, spaced maybe 100 feet apart. They seemed to be survey markers. Written along the edge of each one were the words: Bluff Meander. Playful words in a playful cliff-side wind: The markers are meandering downriver. The water is meandering over and*

*under ice. The ducks are meandering on the current. Geese meander north to Canada on an airstream. I stand on the edge, too, so I am a bluff meander marker. And I am a bluff meanderer as I follow the river's curves that mark the rift that created the Rio Grande.*

When I resume my walks with the intentionality of my data collection phase of the research, I put the pieces of Moustakas's design together. I listen again and again to the recordings of my co-researchers responses. I contact them for clarifications, revisit my self-dialogues. I reflect on the skills of ecological perception (Sewall, 1995) and the qualities of the ecosublime experiential process (Rozelle, 2006), as well as other vocabulary gleaned from my literature reviews to help me tease out the words, phrases, depictions, and stories that convey these ecowriters' experiences of nature as well as evolve my own ability to perceive and describe my own. I also intermittently drop back into the subliminal places in myself to indwell, incubate, and intuit this "experience that has profoundly affected the investigator" (Moustakas. 1990, p. 53).

## Presentation of Data

### Co-researchers

I collected data through open-ended conversational dialogues (Moustakas, 1990, pp. 46-49) between four other nature writers and myself. Dialogues are a participatory exchange. I simultaneously asked about, responded to, and reflected on their descriptions of experience of Nature within the conversation, keeping in mind my definition of Nature in the Introduction to this thesis: the essential, innate interactions of all dispositions of Gaia, organic and inorganic, human and not human, constructed by humans and constructed by non-humans, as well as phenomena both biospheric and cosmic, visible and invisible, physical and metaphysical. These open-ended conversations with self and others reach for the elements and qualities of our collective engagement with all aspects Nature. Because “dialogue cannot be planned” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47), however, the unscripted responses that emerged further enriched and informed my search for key elements of our experiences.

For the sake of privacy, I use the first name only of each co-researcher, and only give the basics of their personal biographies and locations. It was incidental to my research that two of the co-researchers had attended Prescott College as undergraduates at least 10 years apart and several decades before my graduate studies. I have included their discussion about engagement in the college’s wilderness orientation and solo because it featured greatly in their initial awareness of and depictions of vivid experiences of Nature. Kaplan and Talbot (1983) have very illuminating qualitative studies on wilderness experiences, as does John Davis (1989,



2008). These studies, however, are not specifically related to writers, and my co-researchers discussed many other experiences of Nature, both in wilderness and other settings, that occurred outside and after the context of undergraduate orientation.

Since there are only four co-researchers and me as the primary researcher, I have created full portraits of each of them rather than selecting just one or two. I have done a briefer portrait of myself because my writings, my voice, and my experience are spread throughout this study. I have offered the participants' individual voices from the informal conversational dialogues as well as pieces of the co-researchers' writing (in italics), including poetry, personal narrative, or fiction. These writings reflect the interior experience of the writer, and especially in these selections, they give eloquent language to their experiences of nature.

### **Individual portraits**

**Ana** is a feature writer, novelist, graphic designer, and photographer. She is the mother of four children and lives on an acre or so of land overlooking the city in which she lives. Although her family enjoyed camping when she was young, her first relationship to nature was through love of animals, particularly her, as yet unrealized, desire to own a horse.

Ana: We went camping here and there, car camping. We went into Bandolier, I remember camping with my dad in Alamo Canyon. But it wasn't quite the same. I had a sinking feeling one year on my birthday when I got a backpack. I didn't want a backpack; I wanted a horse. I loved animals and my head was always in the clouds. I liked animals in a dreamy way but going into nature wasn't part of it.

She attended Prescott College as an undergraduate and it was on her backcountry orientation and solo that she had her first undeniably intense experiences in nature.

Ana: So we set out and I had no idea what was ahead of me, and what was ahead of me was a complete shedding of who I was.

Cinny: So there was something in the first week that made you a totally different person? What was it? The effort? The landscape?

Ana: There were moments that shaped something for me and I don't know exactly how to describe it. One night we slept on the bank of this river called Clear Creek and I put my sleeping bag next to the water in a soft patch of sand. In the middle of the night, I popped awake, for no reason, wide awake, and heard something. It was the sound of water so I looked out of my sleeping bag and saw the river was trickling toward me. I jumped up and grabbed my sleeping bag. How did I know that the river was rising? My body knew something.

As part of describing her experience, Ana told the story of an encounter with a hummingbird that also transformed and empowered her sense of personal identity.

Ana: Essentially, it was one foot in front of another step, step, step, and step again and again. The sun was bearing down, burning the side of my leg, so I wrapped it in a bandanna and kept cooling it with my water until I ran out of water. By the time I got to the top of the mesa, I was a wreck. I just wanted to go home. I was feverish and just wanted to be home in bed. Mom! The assistant of the group sat next to me and made me drink tons of water. My feet dangled over the cliff in the middle of this desert on the top of a mesa, surrounded by scrubby junipers, sandy hot red rock . . . . Suddenly a hummingbird came out of nowhere; it flew right up to me, hovered in front of my face

and stared at me. [Ana holds her arm out and cups her palm] This close. It just hovered like that for I don't know how long, and then flew back into nowhere. I looked at the assistant to see if I had really seen this bird. He smiled and said, "That was an Ana's hummingbird." I don't what that kind is . . . I'm not even sure I remember exactly what markings it had... but it actually helped me. I felt better. The next day was a little easier. That first week before re-supply I was sore, exhausted, miserable, then after being with the hummingbird in my feverish state, it got easier.

All week the trudging and the pain were so impersonal. Through country I had never seen. Pain, adjusting my pack belt, my straps, just to find a shred of comfort . . . and shockingly beautiful views. People I didn't know. Hard trails. Brambles. Pain. After the moment [with the hummingbird], just those few seconds, it all felt okay. It was not just about the pain and step and step after step after step. Oh, and too bad you're tired, climb this mesa. It was a piece of magic. It all felt worthwhile.

Later this magical experience informed Ana's relationship to photography.

Ana: As a photographer, part of the impetus of photography is that you try to hold on to those moments of magic, but I've learned, come to the realization that there are some moments that you just can't shoot: you can't shoot the moon at certain times and you can't shoot some kinds of waves. Some things are not meant to be captured, and that's what the bird was for me.

As a result of her newfound passion for wildness, Ana tried environmental activism while in college.

Ana: There was a lot of environmental activism [at Prescott], direct action to save things like Mount Graham. In that situation, the Vatican was affiliated with funding to put a

huge telescope on the summit but there was an endangered red squirrel that lived on the mountain that would be further endangered by this project. I felt so much passion. I got so caught up in that I began to feel broken about it all. I felt like I was only one person. What can I do? Everything is dying all around me and I was sad all the time. The squirrel is dying; no one is listening to me . . . . It was so much like when I was a child and I'd get these mailers of endangered animals being killed for their fur. I felt like I was bleeding inside. That feeling of openness was what I felt on the orientation trip, but that made me feel empowered. That's why I ultimately had to step back from environmental work, it made me feel lost. I felt powerless and didn't know how to navigate those feelings. I was too young, thinking there was some answer out there but I couldn't see it.

There was another phenomena of nature, however, that later made her feel strong and efficacious as a woman: pregnancy and childbirth, giving birth three times at home with the assistance of a midwife.

Ana: How that strong sense of self I got from my wilderness immersion experience translated later was through the physical act of becoming a mother.

Cinny: Pregnancy completely changes our relationship to our body.

Ana: Especially for women who can experience it naturally. So many are taken completely out of the process. I had three at home and one in the hospital. I am glad I had Grayson in the hospital, though, because he was placenta previa.

Cinny: That's what medicine is for.

Ana: I'm glad it wasn't my first birth, though, because I had to fight for basic rights,

arguing with the anesthesiologist about leaving me awake for the C-section. He said, “Honey, believe me you’ll want this.” I said, “No, don’t knock me out. I know what I’m doing.”

Childbirth was a place to surpass myself. I could get out of myself. And that’s the empowerment of the solo in nature, the wilderness experience, or the endurance experience of unfettered birth where we’re the center of our own world and the consequence is that we get to know how strong we are.

Ana later developed a passion for the red rock country of Utah, hiking the area with her mother and her children. She also feels the flooding desecration of Glen Canyon by the dam in a particularly personal way, an experience that she transmuted into writing.

Cinny: So where did the writing piece come in and when did you try to write about these ineffable experiences in the wild, for example that beautiful piece in your novel about going underwater in Lake Powell [the reservoir created by flooding Glen Canyon]?

Ana: I’m trying to construct a novel around that scene at Glen Canyon. I’m truly obsessed by this canyon . . . Remember when we saw that film at REI [*Resurrection: Glen Canyon And A New Vision For The American West* by James Kay] The land features are coming back since the drought has lowered the water level in Lake Powell, but the photographs of the original canyon left me feeling it has been lost before I knew it was lost to me.

When Ana brought this excerpt from a novel to another writer’s group, I asked her if I could include it as representing a facet of her experience of Lake Powell. She agreed.

The water, when it closes over me, sends my lungs into spasm. It floods my ears and I blow it away from my nose. As I swim out and am pulled down by the weight of the bag,

I hear a low, distant thrumming. The motor on a faraway houseboat, perhaps. I'm not sure. All I know, as the water seethes around me, is that I finally have the answers I need. In the depths below, miles of lost geography—canyons and riverbanks, caves and ruins—spread out across the dark expanse. I imagine the drowned trees, and wonder how long it took for them to lose their grip on the earth and float back up to the sunlight. I wonder about the ruins—rocks and mortar placed hundreds of years before by unknown hands and lost in the slow rise of water when the river was dammed at Page, Arizona, more than forty years ago. I can see these things in my mind; the images flash as the water grips me, as I drop through the depths. I am past the edge of what was once a cliff and sinking, in perfect darkness, away from the moonlight and pattern of ripples. And then, the thrum is in my head, in my body. I resonate with it as my lungs burn, the last of my air gone, and squeeze my eyes shut tight against the pain that rises within me.

Staccato.

Fragmented.

I reach out to grab . . . nothing.

*Water rushes through my searching fingers and I know then that it is time.*

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Cinny: That desire to write the experience, for some people it comes in at a seep and others as an epiphany. We have an experience that is greater than ourselves—inside our body like pregnancy or outside in canyons or magically like the bird coming to you when you needed it. But sometimes it defies words, you are right. When we feel so close, it

feels inseparable from our skin. What's the leap for you to have the experience and then know it's so powerful you want to write about it and can write about it?

Ana: It's a call to express what I've seen and done, like old mapmakers. Look, I went here and mapped this. I have a desire to share my experience as well as personally process it. It is the usual way I process emotions. It's not a choice, really. I have to write and whenever I get down with my day or my life, I always remember I have these projects. My writing is me; that's mine. So far, I've let people in a little bit. Chris doesn't read much, so I don't give my work to him. I gave him the Baja pig story but he said, "Oh pretty" What? It was one of the "holy shit" moments of my life: the pig, birth, blood, dead people. It was one of those moments of [recognition about animals] that marked my life. I changed. If you are a writer, you write those marker moments. It wasn't pretty.

Writing is an integral part of Ana's attempt to make sense of those marker moments that define her experience of Nature. The excerpt below is from the Baja pig story that also shows the sensibility that later informed her own embodied experience of childbirth.

*The blade of a pocketknife catches the noon sun seconds before disappearing into the rounded pink flesh of a pig that is trussed up in a tree opposite the church. This tiny Mexican town is made of red dust and time and the laughter of children who board at the open-air school across the way . . . but there is something else too. Some desperation that has brought us to this point with the pig in the air, upside down, twisting on the ropes holding her feet. I can hear her struggling for breath across the distance between us, just as I hold my own breath in horror when her blood bubbles up around the blade. It draws a reddening line down the length of her abdomen, and my vision blurs with tears. I forget, as I watch, why we are here. Everything in my world has narrowed to the*

*sight of the pig.*

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Putting sense of self together with embodiment, writing, and being in nature, Ana concludes:

Ana: What it boils down to is that as humans we all have that universal need to reach for something that calls to us. Meditation on a mountaintop for five years, or whatever, ultimately eschewing that self that hems you in, creeps up, that naysayer, grounding voice in the wrong way, plodding through life. Wilderness... stepping into it and out of it isn't enough. I need it more than I have it. Bringing it back into my life is so important. It's the closest I have ever been to knowing myself in life, and the closest I ever could be. When the chips are down, I know I have to walk in wilderness and just keep going.

Except from her early realization of planetary ills through flyers and calendars, Ana's experiential epiphany about the importance of Nature began in late adolescence and resulted from very tactile, physical events such as hiking, environmental activism, traveling, and photography. Moriah discovered Nature at a much younger age.

**Moriah** is a poet, novelist, and practitioner of healing techniques such as ortho-bionomy (Overmyer, 2009), a gentle somatic body adjustment technique, and emotional frequency training (Flint, G., et al, 2006), a body tapping technique based on acupuncture points used for treatment of emotional problems and trauma. She works with animals and humans. She describes herself as a synesthete (Than, 2011), a person for whom one sensory pathway leads to automatic,



involuntary experiences in a second sensory pathway, like hearing colors or tasting letters on a page. Since her early childhood in New England, she has felt intense experiences of reciprocity with many aspects of the natural world.

Moriah: I was sensitive to the fact that everything wants to talk. But some things are valued as “real” talk and some not. And then particular things like energies without bodies really scared me and my own body really scared me, too. When I was younger, I gravitated to animals because it was such a straightforward experience of complete trust. I found I liked the things that matter to animals.... I can understand animals because I have synesthesia like animals but I felt shame and tried to suppress it. Then when I was twenty-four I found an article that gave it a name in *Discover* magazine. When I was a kid, I got the message that I wasn’t supposed to experience the world this way, but I do. And now I give myself a lot more permission to be who I am.

Her childhood engagement with nature went beyond living things.

Moriah: [In SNS], we talked about what a rock says. Just so you know, when I was a kid Mom sewed special pockets in my pants because I filled them up—they were bulging—every day with rocks that just wanted me to take them home.

She later told me, “Rocks: Each breath cycle takes them a thousand years, or something like that. Rocks have mastered community, because each rock knows it is the continuation of another—the continuation of every other rock in present time, and the continuation of every other rock in history.”

Moriah extends her synesthetic sensitivity to the constellations. After the interviews, she added,

My mother says that what she thinks of as my first complete sentence was “Moon. Sky.

Night.” The moon knows everything about shadows, and if you let yourself be still and vulnerable, she will tell you one of her secrets. But then you will always have to change. If you don’t want any of her secrets, you will have to change anyway, but you won’t know how to bend into it.

She believes it would have been much more difficult to cope with her heightened experience of the natural world, if she hadn’t been raised in semi-rural New Hampshire.

Moriah: I was very lucky to grow up in semi-rural New Hampshire, which was a pretty good place. (laughs) A friend named a cow after me.

Although the constraints in New England culture against emotional and untamed ways of being ultimately didn’t accommodate her full character, Moriah found something within it that resonated with her view of nature-spirit relationship.

Moriah: I love Shaker furniture because they make it as simple as possible, because that expresses spirit best. There’s a similar conversation about Shaker style and adobe building [in the Southwest]. They are attuned to the earth and leave a lot to God [meaning spiritual inspiration].

Later, she went to study at Brown University but couldn’t find people who shared her experience of the urban world in Providence, Rhode Island. First of all, Moriah told me, “I tried to live in a city for two and a half years, but the sky looked two-dimensional at night and I suffered. The sky deserves darkness to honor its layered depths.” And it felt lonely.

Moriah: I couldn’t tell anyone about my awarenesses. I mean, I had a best friend who thought a mockingbird was a literary invention . . . . I left Brown mainly because I

couldn't live in an urban environment. I couldn't ground there. When I left, I knew I would never live with that sense of self-doubt and despair and nihilism again . . . The real turning point for me was when I came to New Mexico and had this roommate who worked intensively with the nature spirit plant realm of Findhorn. She wrote a book specifically about how to work with nature spirits medically, That's when I felt that I had a grounding, in the sense that from here I can safely journey. I got a lot more facility with that realm of experience and I wasn't scared of it.

Poetry began to play a bigger role in Moriah's life. It could speak the languages that reflected her experience of the world.

Moriah: I had that realization reading Joy Harjo's piece about the fox in the cathedral. It made me realize I'm not alone in this experience of the world.

Here is an excerpt from Harjo's prose poem to which Moriah refers:

The wind blows lilacs out of the east. And it isn't lilac season. And I am walking the street in front of St. Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe. Oh, and it's a few years earlier and more. That's how you tell real time. It is here, it is there. The lilacs have taken over everything: the sky, the narrow streets, my shoulders, my lips. I talk lilac. (Harjo, 1990, p.42)

Moriah conjoins what she personally, physically experiences of the multiple voices of the natural world with her poetic sensibilities. Although she feels that Nature is always greater than our limited language can grasp, there is a purpose beyond human-to-human communication.

Moriah: Explicit [writing] can't contain the experience, but what can language smuggle over from the unsaid? With my characters, I ask, so why are we writing? Like you said, we're writing for humans. There is definitely ceremony in writing. Jesse [my boxer

curled up next to her on the sofa], for example, won't read my work but I'll relate to him better because the transformation of energy and listening skills [that I learn through writing] that transmute into how to be with him. If I personally, explicitly can't write the rock's experience, I can write through the experience of Hiroki [a stone sculptor in her novel]. I can recreate his sense of oneness and mutuality without saying everything I know about rocks in a clunky way.

For Moriah, experiencing parts of Nature that aren't sentient, like mammals, is especially challenging. But she bridges the difficulties in the eloquence of her language, exemplified in this truly poetic disquisition on lakes:

The lake teaches classes on convection and floatation and refraction and high heat capacity. There is a summer-long course in learning that however you push, the lake will let you, but don't think you can affect what the lake was doing anyway. At sunset, the lake hosts special seminars on mayflies and angle of incidence and the underbellies of kingfishers in flight.

Not only does Moriah capture the voices of Nature in this next excerpt about Hiroki, but she also reaches the sense of ceremony in writing.

*Hiroki loved the reassuring feel of rock under his feet and hands as he scaled the north ridge. He draped himself over a large stone, not to rest, just to lay his belly across it. His belly knew what to soak up, what to let go to balance him. The rock, as ever, was patient with his flicker. Still, he wanted to climb further. He wanted someone besides the infinitely agreeable stone to examine his heart. Someone who had more experience with*

*blood.*

*He visited his favorite fat fallen pine, damp and crumbling, beetles and rain sharding its trunk, intact only in its surrender. If Hiroki were a giant and tried to stand it upright or even take it in his arms, he'd destroy it. Maybe disrupt was a better word—it was already on its way to becoming so many different organisms, it was really beyond injury.*

*Climbing higher, up a slope of sweet fern and blackberry canes, he let himself be scrubbed by their pungent tremble, their still life of scent and rasp. The ferns dated back to swamp time, inventing midline and extremities from peat and methane and remaining satisfied with those, without a thought of cortex or mobility, incisors or flight. He touched one, letting its oils mark him with the musk of such contained satisfaction. He smiled at the blackberries.*

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Hiroki fully embraces the experience nature offers him. He does not just rest in it; he soaks it up. He listens. For Hiroki the stone, rotting tree, blackberry cane, or fern, harmoniously understand themselves. This is also the fundamental tenet of ortho-bionomic healing: the body wants to function in a harmonious way. Moriah's relationship to Nature is completely congruent with her healing practice.

Cinny: This [ortho-bionomy] reminds me of the notion of the cell that Bruce Lipton talks about, that we are an agglomeration of cells all speaking to each other. Once Jesse was lying with you like this and you said something's out of place, but I couldn't see you touch him in any way. You said, "I just wanted to see what his rib wanted to do." I now understand that what you did was offer a homeopathic-like touch to give the cells an

awareness and a chance to have a conversation with each other, whether it's a rib, or the spleen, or ligaments, or muscles.

Moriah: That's the basic principle of ortho. And all those things speak very different languages. I dealt with a dog's hip issues for months with no success. I thought I was releasing a muscular pelvic lymph problem. I suddenly realized that it was a ligament problem, and once I realized that, he began to heal. What matters is where the conversation takes place. In what places and organs. Then another client, a woman, had a heart issue that I realized was not inherent to her heart muscle or blood flow but to it being pressed by her chest, her diaphragm. It wasn't a heart problem.

Cinny: And Lipton says that the cells also hold an emotional part.

Moriah: Yes, and this woman found her soulmate a month after we released the pressure of the diaphragm on her heart. I had to listen very carefully.

Cinny: And release her heart from its captivity, poetically speaking.

Moriah: But I had to listen to the whole system.

Whole-system body listening is not different from creative listening for Moriah. The SNS group and concept tried to connect the discrete elements of spirit, nature, and story, and it offered Moriah a place to express her multiple awarenesses.

Moriah: At first, I wasn't sure how to make SNS writing discreet from the rest of my explorations. It's such a big project, I mean all the pieces of what I more or less obsess about all the time. I mean life explorations. Absolutely wonderful that you obsess about the same things. [smile] Hard to say these are the way it affects me, but I was able to

bring into language things I've never brought into language before.

Cinny: I'm surprised that you have experienced them but not brought them into your poetry before?

Moriah: There were some discussions we had that I definitely hadn't put into words before, some very basic perceptions I have about the world, and to be able to discuss them with others who see things the same way. Who are we and how do we relate to the world? What's in the depths of the world? Certain things that are a big part of my lens that some of them I hadn't articulated . . . You can come here, too. (She invites the cat into her space—cat meows). I feel like the conversations we've had have been so embodied. Even as we've been talking tonight, I've been shivering in a neurological way, like I'm reorganizing something.

Cinny: Is that a good thing?

Moriah: Oh yes. Whatever it is we're finding through this conversation is influencing my whole body. It is important to share and communicate the experience. Translating it is like a ferry crossing a river.

Here's how her character Becky tries to cross that river, or in my metaphor, the living root bridge, to find the voices of nature as Hiroki experiences them. This excerpt is from Becky's letter to Hiroki written in an SNS session.

Moriah: Hiroki is so easy; he's fine with the disconnect. Even when he's tied up in knots, he's having a good time. Becky on the other hand is miserable when she's tied up in knots. Even when she's having pleasure, she's ruminating about everything.

Cinny: So her way of being informs you about something you need to come to terms with. His way of being allows you to say you can be easier with the unknown. Back off

or not know. Your experience of your characters is somehow showing you how you have to be in the larger world too?

Moriah: [They are] Equally fun and equally me.

*I climbed the ridge today to go looking for more things that might be evidence of the generosity of nature. I noticed the different colors of pine needles, the young ones growing in so ostentatiously pale, getting ready for the old ones to fall out. Like Cat's fur, except with her fur you never know what's about to go until it does, and then it's there on the sofa or coming out of the brush into your hand.*

*I wondered which are the ones you [Hiroki] most like to eat—the dark needles or the light ones? Probably both, knowing you. But then I don't know, do I?*

*See, I still can't do this right. I broke twigs for a while and listened to them snap. It's interesting, how many things shine out there. The old dead ones with the bark coming off are so silvery. I guess all the dead stuff is generous to the saprophytes. Or maybe the saprophytes are generous to us, so we don't have to go looking at all of that. There's no real estate for mausoleums in nature—not without some squatter turning every carcass into a den or dinner.*

*I tried listening some more to see if I'd have better luck that way. It was too early for nighthawks. I liked the grasses knocking against each other. I don't know if sound is technically generous because it's just properties of vibration, but maybe Emily would say our bodies are generous for wiring our auditory cortex to pleasure centers.*

*I decided to look at the clouds, because of how much you like things that are*



*always changing. There were some long, feathery ones that shone like fiberglass, cutting into the sunlight to get an edge of pink, an edge of green out of it. Do prisms make the sun bleed?*

*I don't know about the fluffier clouds. I tried to pay attention but my brain kept turning them into different things—I know I didn't feel the same way you do when you're being with clouds. I'm all out of strategies here, though, so I asked the clouds to tell me something, and then I sat there feeling stupid for a while until my stomach felt weird. I was just awash in—well, the problem is I don't know how to describe it so I don't know if it was actually there. I was awash in a feeling of no real edges, like I was just one thing, and I was being bent.... I wondered if clouds are how the river surrenders, when it's tired of being so forceful. But then rain could rip the life out of a butterfly, couldn't it? So it's all just a question of scale....*

*It still bothered me about the clouds, though. How can a being be so temporary? How can something not belong to anything, not even itself? What happens to you when you give yourself over to that? Is that why you come back so clear? All the way back down I felt like I was missing something that should be in my pockets. I didn't even know where my lungs were, my breath was so transparent.*

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I conclude Moriah's portrait with this excerpt because it is her unique expression of the character's and, by extension, her own experience of nature. Melanie's initiation into deep relationship to Nature did not come as early and intensely as Moriah's undeniable whole-body engagement; but like Ana, it was equally irreversible.

**Melanie** is a poet, a personal chef, and a former backcountry guide. She grew up in the suburbs of Chicago but awoke to nature through trips to state parks with her mother and reading literature about pioneers. Melanie said, “I wanted that experience of forging through pristine areas like the Rockies. I had only read about them but it was what I wanted.” Then, the family took a train trip to the Colorado Rockies when she was 12 years old:

Melanie: I grew up in the Midwest where everything was flat outside of the city, and when I literally saw the mountains [from the train window], I felt like I was contained in a bubble and wanted to leap out of window.

Cinny: I am struck by how you describe the train ride as confining you in a bubble.

Melanie: As a kid, I read voraciously and they were all pioneer stories. I wanted that experience of forging through the wild. I also craved being outdoors as a teen at camp hiking the White Mountains of New Hampshire. So those places were my introduction to being in nature. I don't know how to describe all those feelings. SNS was the place to give name to those experiences. Beauty was a big part of it.

Melanie also experienced an intense awakening to nature through her Prescott College backcountry orientation and solo in Utah's canyon country.

Melanie: Later I went in [to the wild] for days when I went to Prescott.... When I was on my Prescott solo in Havasu, Canyon [in Grand Canyon National Park], I was 17 and afraid of being alone, so I made friends with a group of little barrel cactus hanging on the wall across from my campsite. They became my friends and kept me from feeling lonely and afraid. When I returned years later they were still there. I was so happy to see them

and I felt like we were having a kind of reunion . . . . My Prescott solo in Havasu Canyon cemented in me the conviction that if you sit in nature quietly, something will come to you.

After college, she discovered Native American ceremony, and through her participation in vision quests, sundances, and sweat lodges, she made the connection between loving nature and the need to save it.

Melanie: I made my connection [between deep ecology and my work in the world] when I was introduced into Native American ceremonial ways. To bring people together in that native way is to bring people together in the understanding that we come together as members of the Earth. I began to work with a Native woman named Brooke Medicine Eagle (<http://www.medicineeagle.com/>) and we brought women together in ceremony. I worked with her for five years. It was spiritual activism for the Earth.

Later, she ran her own wilderness guide service:

Melanie: After working with Brooke in the camps with fifteen to eighteen people, I went into my own business leading retreats, horseback pack trips in the Canadian Rockies or canoeing. That was my piece of bringing people into wilderness, that sacred place, and sometimes we had ecological themes or spiritual practices. People need to become acquainted in a very intimate way to the natural world. Those of us who have a connection need to share that.... Connecting with earth, we have a better chance of righting the wrongs of the earth. We stand at a critical place.

This ethic penetrates Melamie's nature writing. Here is an excerpt from a spontaneous retrospective writing about the White Mountains of New Hampshire:

*This is why we come now—into the presence and whispered hush of mountain-god. Bird*

*wingbeat heard on uplifting currents in the deep valley coolness. Wind not a sound but a cascade of ceaseless notes. Language lost in importance, and the assist of a strong hand up a steep scramble becomes a new way to know family. You show me this world, how to get here. Loving what we love, in this forest cathedral, without saying: simply sharing, and returning.*

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Time, however, has changed how Melanie manifests the way she shares that connection. Her body is no longer comfortable with long backpacking trips. She is living on a mesa in Northern New Mexico, though, surrounded by the things that have made her life meaningful.

Melanie: Up on Rowe Mesa where I live, there's a Peruvian teacher who has a shamanistic practice including vision quests and sweat lodges. It's called Ayahuaca. I'm fascinated by the fact that on the west are Native American women who do the traditional Lakota Sundance; on the east side of the valley is Ayahuaca leading another version of Sundance. And we're right in between. After all the ceremonial work I've done, where else could you live in between those two practices?

Writing her life experiences has been a constant for Melanie. When she was thirteen she wrote an essay for school about the death of her mother and was told she should always write. She identifies as poet although she greatly admires nature essayists such as Annie Dillard and Gretel Erlich. Her earlier work was infused with her feminist consciousness and also nature, partly because she lived in a cabin on Vashon Island, Washington, for many years. She says she mostly writes about loss, especially human loss. For SNS she wrote a poem about the Fukushima

quake and tsunami. The disaster had as profound an effect on her as the events of 9/11/2001. She said she walked around in a daze for days.

Melanie: I believe the Earth is not fighting back but she is asserting herself in ways that can't be ignored, whittling away at our numbers. (laughs) Especially in the sense that there has to be a reckoning that we can't be in charge.

Here is an excerpt from her poem:

In March, among the first stories of human loss  
was a man whose family disappeared, all  
swept away, when their village tsunami barrier  
was breached. Combing through the seashore debris  
he found only one red sneaker, his grandmother's.

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In our conversation about the same subject, though, she also added her deep empathy for aquatic life. We were talking in terms of Sewall's (1995) skill of re-perceiving depth:

Melanie: One part of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami disaster that really disturbed me was a conversation about the impact of it on the marine life especially whales. What was the impact on the sonar communication, I wondered? What did they do to flee the quake? What happened to their eco-locating. Talk about having your world turned upside down.

Cinny: That's another layer to the disaster, but I don't think there's malice in nature. So many subtle things happen in natural disaster, like change our inner ear and balance. The radiation is human stupidity, but drama of the whale escaping is the same as the human escaping. The same level of pathos, I think.

Melanie: But it really disturbed me to see it from the perspective of aquatic life. Trauma, shock, greed. Members of the pod must have been lost. What if the whale was right under it, or a baby whale thrown into the shore? These are layers of affect in the natural world that we only look at through our expectations, not how it has influenced the rest of the Earth.

Currently Melanie is a personal chef, making healthy food for the elderly, living in community with wilderness—including rattlesnakes—on Rowe Mesa, and being what she calls an “armchair writer.” Yet, she makes the connection between preparing food and the centrality of nature:

Melanie: I’m reading a book about edible education by Alice Waters. She had this description of ego driven cooks that she called “self-impressed adults.” It struck me because it’s how we are when we go out camping. We think its all in control but we take a wrong turn and learn who is really in control as soon as it gets dark, and we feel lost and hungry.

Melanie now appreciates the natural world around her in a slower, more quietly attentive way.

Melanie: Wild things are always there and now I use your little book [note: I always give my workshop participants 2” x 3” composition books because when we are on the trail it is hard to stop and write long journal entries. It is easier to jot down images and encounters in a little pocket-sized notebook for later elaboration]. I use it for anecdotes of encounters that have been popping up for me.

Cinny: Can you give me an example?

Melanie: Well, one day there was a tarantula crossing my path and I just started following it. I followed it all the way to a big rock. It went all around the rock, climbed under a lip upside down until it came out on the top. We sat on the rock together, and I spent time with this tarantula. It looks amazing, all hairy and like it's walking on eight high-heeled boots. It was really fun. We just stayed there with each other, me wondering where it was going.

I'm impressed by how we can allow that relationship to be what it is, rather than the self-impressed meaning, which is not about the tarantula at all, but instead just sitting with it. I'm just being Melanie and the tarantula is just being tarantula and the rock is just being rock.

Cinny: When I was on vision quest [in June 2011] I was struck by the simplicity of language [between myself and nature's voices] and my willingness as a hyper-educated intellectual to trust that there was nothing trivial in those responses.

Melanie: It's the invitation to shun language. We love language. But there's a place beyond it. Hard to accept. But I take it as a challenge. Like Mary Oliver, She has been able to take the distancing aspect and turn it around for all of us who read her work participate in her experience. Taking people into wilderness isn't totally necessary if there is this other way to convey the experience of nature.

Cinny. Perhaps we want to get away from the nature writer as self-impressed.

Both Moriah and Melanie noted that some experiences or relationships to the natural world challenge the limitations of human expression, however eloquent our language may become. Clarity seems to come more from humility in description, like this depiction of Melanie's focused attention with another being of nature:

Melanie: I once watched a six-foot snake crawl out of its skin. For weeks it had lived under my back porch, very pacific, I almost stepped on it many times but it never reacted. I thought it was an old ashen tattered, blind snake at the end of its life. One morning, it left the porch and wrapped around the base of a big nearby juniper tree. This was so strange that I went up onto a scaffold to watch. I decided I wanted someone to come get it . . . not really wanting a six-foot snake under my porch or around the tree . . . so I left to make a call and then returned to my scaffold to watch. When I looked again, the tail end looked belly-up, all white, like it was half-dead. So I climbed down and walked within three feet of it. What I thought was the tail was the old skin, and on the other end, was the same length of new snake. Over the next few minutes, it slithered all the way out of the skin and it became the most stunning, luminescent, brand new, energetic six-foot rattlesnake. He took off, towards water I thought. I followed him for a while but when I lost him, I stopped. I didn't want to follow him anymore when I couldn't see him. It was amazing. Old dead mottled snake turns into young bright new snake. It was probably the most alive being I have ever seen. I imagined him going to the creek to go for a swim in his birthday suit (laughter).

Cinny: So it has places to live on your homestead?

Melanie: I don't know where they den. I'd like to learn about all that. So I know what I'm dealing with . . . and they are fascinating. But I don't want to see them all wrapped together in their den. My perceptual flexibility does not go that far. That and swarming are not things I can ever get comfortable with.



Cinny: And that's a good thing. Your imagination is your version of the rattlesnake's rattle.

Melanie's sense of a less intrusive communion with nature falls into an ecospiritual relationship with her writing, too.

Melanie: I woke up from some dream the other night and I wrote this strange poem and self-directive. In very simple language eight lines long, which ended "What if the person you want to be is the person you have become?" Such a mysterious piece of language . . . And I realized that maybe . . . what if we don't really have to try, just be it, do it, not to try.

Cinny: I'm looking at your face and see your personal wonder about your dream experience.

Melanie: There's something I don't even understand about my writing. Where it comes from. Some of it's about being an elder. It's amazing how things come to be, be-come.

As I listened to Melanie's insights, I thought of holons (Wilber, 2007) and unitive dimensions of being, (Spretnak, 1997) and inclusive awareness (Abram, 1996). Melanie embraces Nature through participatory experience as well as through those aspects often not accepted as real, like dreams. Randi speaks to another aspect of Nature's impact: psychological and spiritual healing.

**Randi** is a published author, poet, and essayist, originally from New Jersey. She has written in the area of health care and experiential education. She describes herself as a Jewish shaman storyteller who has been particularly interested in exploring the earth-based practices in the ritual traditions of her faith. She is committed to engaging people in an experience of nature because it has always been a reliable source of solace to her.

Randi: When I'm in nature I am my most authentic self. I don't people please. I have all my thoughts and what very quickly creeps in are all the voices of the trees, the stones, the clouds, the birds. I'm awakened to who I am. Sometimes I go on the huge walkabouts when I'm troubled with somebody or something. My heart feels very contracted because I feel angry or critical and I turn all that against myself. Some of my walks I walk with open hand for hours saying yes thank yes thank you yes thank you, just to melt some of the shellacking that is over me. Then suddenly I'll fall to my knees and ball my eyes out saying thank you. Then the real me comes out and I become playful. I giggle. I delight. I touch. I feel.

Randi said she sometimes finds it hard to sustain those feelings, but she feels lucky that she knows where to go when life gets crazy.

Randi: Most of the time, I'm a human *doing* in this world, not a human *being*. And I spend a lot of time trying to be a human being not a human doing. I have to schedule time to relax or have down time. But I don't have to fight that in nature. I feel tendrils of energy coming up through my feet supporting me. I can hear my own inner whisperings. I'm loving and playful.

She has had this awareness since childhood.

Randi: I grew up on a lake and would just sit for hours on the edge of the water. Look at the moon. That was beautiful for me. I've had that luxury of nature's unconditional love my whole life.

But her sensibility about Nature was not always joyful:

Randi: I've always felt the pain of the earth, though, since I was a little girl. I just didn't know what it was. [In my understanding of how precious nature is] I am exactly the same person I was when I was sixteen.

Randi was very disturbed by the 1980s' revelations about the damage of acid rain. Like Melanie's response to the Fukushima quake, our experience of nature is not always about its harmonious ever-present love. It is often unpredictable, randomly, violent, and destructive, whether induced by human exploitation or not. This excerpt is from an apocalyptic story she wrote at sixteen years old about a child trying to get home before the nighttime acid rains fall. It was called "From Which Direction The Last Rain Came."

As the luminescent sun slowly descended towards the edge of the horizon, dusk gradually advanced its course. I glanced over my shoulder. My paranoia of the dark increased with every step and with the inevitable fact that it would come. I hunched my shoulders against the biting wind while continuing with my seeming endless journey.

The mind is a strange and magical object. I'm constantly aware and dominated by my vivid imagination, not only at night in delirious nightmares but also during the day where such surrealistic images crowd my body and soul that I sit and wonder will it ever end.

As I turned my head for a second glimpse, my eyes quickly studied the ground, the sky, anything that would signify rain or wetness, but there were only dry lifeless trees with mushroom-looking branches sticking out of the dead stumps. There were also white clouds with a greenish tint. I saw these clouds because they were in the same direction from which the last rains came. My fears redoubled because the clouds were directly above me and I shuddered at the thought of what would happen if I didn't get home before it reached its climax. They were heavy with the substance from which so many

had died. Suddenly I saw a dark shadow peek furtively out from behind a towering building. It was then the first drop fell.

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Her current written work, however, takes a lighter more ecophilic approach. It is filled with ceremony, humor, and a sense of reciprocity with the tree spirits.

*Circular Breathing*

*exhale! demands the tree*

*I'm chokin' here!*

*so I comply, and wipe my mouth*

*with the phosphorescent leaf,*

*highlighting the contours of my breath,*

*and our life forces meet*

*in that instant*

*it is love...*

*as the leaves perk up*

*they smile at the sun,*

*while I grow blue and slack jawed*

*gasping on my knees*

*praying to my God*

*until the tree busts out laughing*

*and exhales –*

*rosy red fills*

*my milky veins*

*and we live forever*

*together, tree and I*

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Randi feels she is propelled forward by her writing and in her earth-based practices in a variety of fields, from lay rabbinical practice to experiential education. Most importantly,

Randi: My whole being as a Jewish shaman storyteller is the gift that God gave me as a writer to translate nature that way... We are all shamans. A shaman is someone who lives in concert with the earth. Humans can all be shamans.

I resonate with so many of my co-researchers' perspectives on Nature and writing, and they shared them with exquisite honesty and vulnerability. I feel Ana, Moriah, Melanie, and Randi all exude the shaman's expansive embrace of Nature (Abram, 1996). These wild writers are all literary shamans.

**Cinny.** My personal story, as well as many of my experiences of Nature as expressed in my book (2010) and my responsive self-dialogues, is sprinkled throughout these pages. I have begun, though, to layer insights from my own experiences of Nature into my fiction. Here is an excerpt from my novel-in-progress in which, like Moriah's character Hiroki, I am reaching for the porous place between human and stone.

*In the language of afternoon light, the color rose whispered along the cliffs. The long thin boy who was tucked in a rock shelter at the base of the canyon wall, his eyes*

*half shut, imagined that the stone was as porous as skin and light slipped from deep inside it. The canyon became as soft as the boy's name. For some reason, since the first day he had wandered down a dry creek bed into this place, the light and the stone and the rose-colored whispers always made him greet himself: "Hey there, Josh. Look at that." But I am not soft, he insisted, opening his eyes wide and stomping his boot against the shelter wall. He was lean and muscled, but too tall for the space arched around him, a space that had once contained him like a basket. Now his bent legs formed a doorway around the entrance. His head nicked the ceiling of ancient water-polished rock, black as his hair. And all his treasures were within reach.*

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In this excerpt from a short story, I reach for the state of identification with nature (Rozelle, 1990) that comes to the character from despair and surrender.

*The mold of her body in the silt felt luxurious when she awoke. She licked the grit on her lips and smelled something so soft and exotic that she thought hopefully, "I must have died." Then the vision of her flight, her fear, the girl, and thirst flooded her mind. Carmen moved her aching knees and realized she was quite alive. She hoisted herself up on her elbows with a groan. The moon bathed everything in exquisite contrast of shadow and light. Carmen rolled over and stared up at a dry twiggy cactus that appeared dead except for several large, pure white, star-shaped flowers with glowing petals. She knew what it was: the night blooming cereus. She felt a rush of intoxicated joy at the sight of these blossoms, rarely seen in the wild because the plants were scattered loners and no*

*one knew exactly when the thorny branches would bloom.*

*Carmen rested back in the sand and her mind ambled with the same easy motion as her running on the wilderness trails, as the moon slipping through the night, and as the life cycle of the cereus blossoms. The mountains loomed above the ravine, born eons ago and still vital, she thought, whereas the flowers and scent would be gone before dawn. Her own life span was a tiny breath compared to the ancient stone yet bountiful next to the transitory cereus. She lay there filled with calm, no longer suspended between poisons, but between one wonder and another.*

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My writing constantly evolves (Zinsser 1989, p. 155) because of the new information I receive daily from the natural world. The heuristic process has illuminated the tidal movements from in to out of knowing, intuiting, and incubating my most essential engagement with Nature, and I learn through writing what I sometimes could not find words to describe in the moment of experience.

### **Illumination**

The illumination process occurs when the researcher is “open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29) emerging from the data. I was receptive to the opportunity for illumination as I transcribed and revisited the voices of my open-ended conversations with my co-researchers and myself. I incorporated their writing samples for review, too (as I received their permission to do so). I examined my own responses within the interviews, my self-dialogues, and my fiction writing. I reviewed the vocabulary and concepts of various relationships to Nature described throughout the literature review, including:

feeling wonder and awe  
connecting to something greater  
overcoming/healing trauma  
transcending ordinary reality and time  
feeling particularity of place  
recognizing the infinite complexity of place  
sensing deeply  
perceiving space  
feeling union with the Earth  
surviving a physical challenge  
developing embodiment  
feeling a compelling urge to create  
describing experience through words and story  
enchantment  
fear, shock, or terror  
enhancing identity

I reflected on which of these ideas, or combinations of them, were starting points in thinking about the experiences and how they did or did not mirror the experiences of my co-researchers. Aspects of them were similar, but none quite expressed my wild writers' deep humility in the presence of Nature. The themes of spirit, nature, and story were also starting points relevant to my early studies and were present, explicitly and implicitly, in the informal conversations. The



illumination process is an “awakening to new constituents of experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29) and the key elements could not be exclusively labeled or limited by those themes and needed expression in a clear, simple, fresh vocabulary in order to reveal the fundamental experiences that we five wild writers, as Moriah said, “smuggle over from the unsaid.”

### **Explication**

After I fully reviewed my data as well as focused on my question, indwelt with the information, and returned to self-inquiry, I let the key elements of my four ecological writer’s experience of Nature rise to my conscious mind along with my own elements of experience. Then, like assembling a puzzle, I perused the elements and qualities of the writers’ experiences of Nature, flipped them over, peered at their multi-sensory forms, threaded one to another until a coherent picture of experience emerged and a composite depiction unfolded. The key elements coalesced as a unified wild writer’s experience.

### ***Composite of the Wild Writer’s Experience of Nature***

Illuminated by selections of data from participants in this study, these are the seven basic elements that appear to characterize the experience of Nature as expressed by the wild writers participating in this study. I used the most down-to-earth language to convey their primal reality.

#### **1. The wild writer experiences Nature as a summons or response from non-human worlds.**

I was so tired. Up at the top, though, I found the most amazing place to sleep on a rock with a perfect curvature on my body. Like it invited me.

- Ana

One day last winter, I was driving into my valley and I saw an animal on a cedar fence post, standing and doing a classic salute to the sun like yoga, an exaltation.... It bent my thinking. I saw it. But what I saw, I don't know.

- Melanie

If you get on the rock's page, it's all about change and process in a different time frame. But I think rock's experience themselves as surface, layer transformation, and change.

- Moriah

I thought, where the hell did this creature [a hummingbird] come from? There weren't any wildflowers... it was a complete desert... it just came out of the heat and disappeared into the heat. But it actually helped me. I felt better. It was an amazing magical moment that's there and then it's not.

- Ana

In that arroyo, this dry barren dusty place... I lie down in the sand and feel the earth support me. At first, I feel dizzy so I track a cloud. Then I'm part of the cloud's movement, and pretty soon it's not just that I'm part of movement. I *am* the movement and part of every thing. I remember it's not just me.

- Randi

There's an acuity of my animal thought in that space [the woods]. It's not just that I see a hawk and have a communication. That's part of it, but there's a knowingness inside of me.

- Moriah

I would walk and these little pieces of wood would summon me. I'd take them back to my sacred circle and form them into small woodcarvings. I just shaped them into the contours of little animal effigies. On the last day, I had to decide what to do with them. I had them all laid out in front of me. Take them back? A treasure of my experience? I realized that, no, I wasn't going to take them back. They belonged here as caretakers.

- Cinny

## **2. The wild writer experiences Nature as conversations among all beings in the cosmos.**

If you think anything is complicated, listen to one raindrop. Then another. The raindrops are all in agreement, and you cannot help but agree with them.

- Moriah

If you sit in nature quietly, something will come to you. It could be for just an hour. In two days, more will come. In four days of fasting, a lot more will come. The messages are life changing and will bring you to a place that makes you want to advocate for the earth, to save the natural places in the world.

- Melanie

I could spend my time in the canyon resisting every thing, or I could talk to it, be part of it.

-Ana

I embraced a huge aspen. I could feel my pulse running with the sap under the bark, and I suddenly silently asked, "Who am I?" and Aspen said, "You are your heart." It was so simple but I wanted to ask again so I went and asked the next aspen, "That aspen just said I am my heart. What do you think?" The second aspen said, "You better listen to her."

- Canny

When I do animal communication, it's not the same order of conversation [as human conversation]. I always need to slow way down and get into new language.... If it is a dog, I have to get into his place. It is not a repartee.

- Moriah

*Exhale! demands the tree, I'm chokin' here!*

*so I comply*

- Randi

Wind owns the ridge. The ponderosas are her singing bowls. The creaking, lightning-

struck loners also help her with her voice. At night when she carries warm air up the mountain, the stars explain that she is outlived by stillness.

- Moriah

I said, Tree, are you tired of me? Tree scoffed. Does the sun tire of shedding light on me day after day? Does the sun tire of me shedding my leaves in winter? Does the sun tire of helping me bring my leaves back in spring? I stood there with my mouth open. Okay, I got my answer.

- Randi

The wind blew like a sea gale and all our tents were whipped around all night long. Some turned into these amazing Dr. Seuss-like forms. Do not underestimate me, the wind was saying.

- Canny

I was sensitive to the fact that everything wants to talk. But some things are valued as “real” talk and some not.

- Moriah

### **3. The wild writer experiences Nature as a vast capacity to harm as well as heal.**

In the middle of the night, I popped awake, for no reason, wide-awake, and heard something. It was the sound of water so I looked and the river was trickling toward me. I jumped up and grabbed my sleeping bag. How did I know that the river was rising? It

was so strange that I got away just minutes before my sleeping area was totally underwater.

- Ana

*As the luminescent sun slowly descended towards the edge of the horizon, dusk gradually advanced its course. I glanced over my shoulder. My paranoia of the dark increased with every step and with the inevitable fact that it would come.*

- Randi

We have all generations of snakes up there on Rowe Mesa. There is a lot of inconvenience to living with rattlesnakes, but I couldn't kill it.

- Melanie

Seeing the rock breathing is seeing the self breathing. Watching the ants getting ready to swarm in that very minute I stepped outdoors was a form of goodbye.

- Canny

There is a new spider mama in my lightwell already, getting fat with eggs. I don't know what to do; she's breaking the agreement. No black widows on the bed side of the apartment, because there's more scope for misunderstanding among the bedding. Still, the winter has been lonely without spiders. Maybe one day I will understand them well

enough to touch her.

Moriah

There's things out there that might want to eat me.

Randi

I don't want to see them [rattlesnakes] all wrapped together in their den. My perceptual flexibility does not go that far. That and swarming [bees] are not things I can ever get comfortable with.

-Melanie

I can't experience the totality of galaxies' love to the degree that I can understand mammalian love, not all the mystery of it. You work on it, though, by becoming a better vessel for vastness.

- Moriah

#### **4. The wild writer experiences Nature with the exterior body.**

My great aunt has me feel all the herbs among the brickwork of her garden. Lambs' ears are furry and pale as lichen. Lemon balm is bumpy like the skin of a dinosaur.

- Moriah

Being in nature is a being-in-the-moment experience, which is attentiveness. Other things fall away, like [being able to hear] the waterfall before you see it and then feel it in the

air.

- Melanie

I lie down and feel the earth support me. At first, I feel dizzy so I track a cloud. Then I'm part of the movement, and pretty soon its not just that I'm part of movement. I am the movement and part of every thing. I remember it's not just me.

Randi

The last day I ran, from the top of the mountain all the way to the final campsite. I felt I've got wings.

- Ana

*My cheeks are chilly, my hands feel hearth-warm in my pockets, and my breath has shape. I look up and visually fall into the fathomless Milky Way. My body becomes tiny. The shooting stars make me gasp.*

- Canny

*The blood-covered piglet is settled into the cradle of white fabric in my hands, and I fold it up, bring it instinctively up to my chest, and begin to rub it between my hands. The taut little body in my grasp is still at first. I rub it vigorously, not daring to look, until I feel a tension and expansion, as the new lungs draw a first breath. I open my hands. The shirt*



*falls away from the body. The little legs jerk, the snout opens. I watch the tiny chest rise, fall. Gasping life under the Mexican sun.*

- Ana

*Hiroki loved the reassuring feel of rock under his feet and hands as he scaled the north ridge. He draped himself over a large stone, not to rest, just to lay his belly across it. His belly knew what to soak up, what to let go to balance him.*

- Moriah

One day there was a tarantula crossing my path and I just started following it. I followed it all the way to a big rock. It went all around the rock, climbed under a lip upside down until it came out on the top. We sat on the rock together, and I spent time with this tarantula.

- Melanie

Wilderness . . . stepping into it and out of it isn't enough. I need it more than I have it. It's the closest I've ever been to knowing my self in life, and the closest I ever could be.

When the chips are down, I know I have to walk in wilderness and just keep going.

- Randi

##### **5. The wild writer experiences Nature with the interior body.**

The stories make me up. I feel them in my body. As a writer in nature, there's a logarithmic opening because whatever was blocking or coggging or guarding is lessened,

and it all floods out.

- Randi

Soil is the galaxy we come from, and the messengers remind me that my cells are made of this.

- Moriah

I knew I had to be centered in my body to be able to journey. In order to move out you have to be able to move in.

- Melanie

It wasn't until I got pregnant and had the circle of women around me and mothers of other small children that I learned to love women. It was an epiphany, the communion and shared experience of gestation and labor and even post birth processes.

- Canny

I'll often sing because nature's moving through me.

- Randi

*In the dream Becky had been about to burst, she was so pregnant . . . There was nothing familiar about it. She liked her body that way. She could feel the baby moving against her*

*bones and organs, snug and fluid, the baby's own bones and organs inside her, a tiny mirror, showing how her body had sweetened into a home for this mellow little life who came into her from someone she loved. She could feel the baby wanting her kindness. Becky only knew how to offer it through her body.*

- Moriah

Each [vision quest fast is] an experience of deprivation, all of which takes us out of our comfort zone so we pay attention better. It is true for me.

- Melanie

Our bodies are a huge conversation going on all the time . . . whether it's a rib, or the spleen, or ligaments, or muscles. And all those things speak very different languages. What matters is where the conversation takes place.

- Moriah

I feel tendrils of energy coming up through my feet supporting me. I can hear my own inner whisperings.

- Randi

## **6. The wild writer experiences Nature as the source of imagination.**

*I am breathless,  
aghast at the painful  
beauty, misshapen  
in each exhale,  
as the world continues to turn  
without my assistance  
or consent*

- Randi

Your imagination is your version of the rattlesnake's rattle.

Cinny

*But here he was, giving each word a birth and a death. There was earth in them; there was heat in them. For just a second, they belonged to something in their borrowed bodies.*

- Moriah

I think writing and photography were attempts to make sense of my nature experience and thoughts, all that stuff that defies words, a feeling that it's so close.

- Ana

[Writing is] rather like going to ceremony and returning to non-ceremonial life and not losing what we've learned. We don't have to target our knowledge [into eco-anything genres, eco-justice exposés], but our experience is woven into our work.

Cinny

There is definitely ceremony in writing. Jesse [a dog], for example, won't read my work but I'll relate to him better because the transformation of energy and listening skills [through writing] transmute in how to be with him.

Moriah

My writing was steeped in nature because my life was steeped in nature.

Melanie

Metaphors are the perfect example of how you leap in language, find the visceral sense, the perfect resonance, then you understand the experience. By setting up the image, you understand the experience.

- Moriah

Trying to convey the totality of our personal experience or the being of a rock, tackling something we experience but aren't really able to describe with human nervous system qualities, like constellations—yet as writers, we do it all the time.

Cinny

Taking people into wilderness isn't totally necessary if there is this other way [writing] to convey the experience of nature.

- Melanie

### **7. The wild writer experiences Nature with sadness.**

The photographs of the original canyon left me feeling it has been lost before I knew it was lost to me.

- Ana

It really disturbed me to see it [the earthquake] from the perspective of aquatic life.

Trauma, shock... Members of the pod must have been lost. What if the whale was right under it, or a baby whale thrown into the shore? These are layers of affect in the natural world that we only look at through our expectations not how it has influenced the rest of the Earth.

- Melaine

I've always felt the pain of the earth, though, since I was a little girl. I just didn't know what it was.

- Randi

I felt so sad and consumed by it [environmental activism]—furthermore, the whales are

dying and the oceans are dying. It turned into this urgent mass of feelings. It was so much like when I was a child and I'd get these mailers of endangered animals being killed for their fur. I felt like I was bleeding inside.

- Ana

*I wish to be Alice falling into a hole in the dust, roll down as far as I need to find my sister and brother creatures, microscopic and macroscopic, vocal and silent. But I am not invited to this Queen's garden because my kind has squandered bounty and balance. Nature took an inexplicable turn by fostering the human mind, fostering the specialization of arrogance instead of synchronicity. We flatten and scourge.*

- Canny

I've always felt the pain of the earth, though, since I was a little girl. I just didn't know what it was.

- Randi

I felt so sad and consumed by it [environmental activism]—furthermore, the whales are dying and the oceans are dying. It turned into this urgent mass of feelings. It was so much like when I was a child and I'd get these mailers of endangered animals being killed for their fur. I felt like I was bleeding inside.

- Ana

I believe the Earth is not fighting back but she is asserting herself in ways that can't be

ignored, whittling away at our numbers.

- Melanie

When I lose trees, I'm not sure where they've gone—it's the wrong kind of silence. I wish I could tell you everything the white birch in my parents' garden told me, but it's a practice, not a story.

- Moriah

These commonalities of five ecological writers' experiences of Nature create a unified whole and bring us, to return to Abram's call to writers: "into the vital presence of that world—and into deep presence with one another." (2010, p. 11).



### Creative Synthesis

A creative synthesis may be “expressed as poem, story, painting, or by some other creative form” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32), so to be consistent with my wild writer self-dialogues and the focus of this inquiry, my synthesis is a story about a composite writer’s experience of Nature. It is based on my initial metaphor of the intention of the wild writer to cross a living bridge into Nature to listen to its multiple voices. The story includes all seven key elements of experience illuminated by this study: Nature’s summons, Nature’s conversations, Nature’s capacity to harm and heal, Nature felt by the exterior and interior body, Nature inspiring the imagination, and finally, sadness about Nature’s demise. The composite writer enters the vast *terra incognita* of experience.

#### Crossing a Living Root Bridge into the Vast

*I sit cross-legged in the leaf mold. The bridge is ahead of me. Behind me, I hear the human dialect of fragmentation: engines. Below me, river phonemes swell and call me on. Each moment in this ecotone is either anticipation of rain, inundation of rain, or like now, the shocking absence of patter.*

*A splash over the bridge’s railing launches me up out of my asana. I am barefoot and naked. The beads of river water play among my pores, so I flow forward filled with apprehension and longing. The ancient stepping-stones are partially submerged in dark soil, leaves, fungus, bacillus, and cilia. The ball of my foot feels the chill of the smooth rock. My next foot feels the spongy release of humus on either side of my arch. I grip the railing and tiny aerial roots twine my wrist. Bark teases my palms. I begin to trot, hopping from stone to stone. The bridge contains me like a basket, and its sway says, “Move on.” So I do, through the threshold.*

*It is dark in the jungle, in the ocular sense of shadow under the arboreal canopy, but also*

*in the tactile mythic sense of daemons, the source of inspiration, and perhaps also demons, the fiendish succubi. I walk forward and the path curves. I hear a low hum of air conversing with the cellular musk of a million plants. I am in a rain forest. Cacao fruit flashes red. Banana fronds reveal swaths of yellow. Coconuts jiggle like big green billiard balls. Star fruit shimmer. I reach out and run my finger down a broad leaf in front of me. It feels sticky on one side and furry on the other. I wonder if it likes to be stroked. I see an iridescent yellow coil in the groove where the leaf meets its stem. My hand and torso instinctively recoil. It is a yellow eyelash pit viper, sleeping its day away. I shake a bead of sweat from my forehead.*

*A bright red Heliconia, ginger's sister and banana's cousin, lights the path ahead so I continue forward. A hummingbird whizzes away from the orange-tipped blossom up into the canopy, so fast it leaves a wake of air. My eyes try to follow it but instead alight on a nest, hanging as peaceful as a hammock between branches of an almond tree. Abruptly a toucan swoops down, clutches the nest with its talons. The hummingbird zips away as the toucan's huge red and green beak rips out tendrils of woven twigs that fall around me like dry rain. When it breaks open a hole, the bird reaches deep inside the nest and pulls out a chick. Swallows it. Then another. Swallows it. And then another. Howler monkeys rumble and toss almond shells onto my path in a drumbeat of disapproval. I now sweat so profusely I can't separate my skin from the humid air or my smell from the scent of sloth scat.*

*I am afraid of demons in the form of venomous reptiles, alligators with razor teeth, or army ants that could swarm me and devour me in the lust of battle, especially now that light is waning in this barely day-lit dome. I catch a movement in my peripheral vision. I turn but*

*nothing is there. Something brushes my other side. Nothing there. Inside me two surges arise with the same power as the river: laughter and tears. I know who the apparition is: my daemon, and I don't want to leave her just yet. There seems to be no room for her in the cacophony of everyday human life. I want to meet my source. I need to meet her. I cross my hands across my stomach to hold in a sphere of emotions pulsing like a fleshy organ, hot with blood on the inside. I drop to my knees, forgetting ants and snakes and reptiles. I am no longer inside my body but participating in a soothing, washing tumble of coconuts, cacao, bananas, pale green star fruit. I'm rolling in fruit of the jungle, fruit of my body, inside and out. I laugh wildly.*

*When my mind's eye clears of the flood of sweet color and my core's heat subsides, I see one plant on the ground next to me: the demon-flower, basket of the devil. The tubular blossom looks like pale sick animal flesh. The leaf-lid slowly rises, revealing the maw. I hear the buzz of its prey and watch a tiny hairy fly pause in front of me. I see the miraculous thousand eyes in the one eye that scans my face. What will compel it: the diluted sweat of me or sumptuous nectar in the basket? It makes a choice and aims for the death trap. I suddenly care for the fly. No, I mutter and reach out my hand to save the insect. Too late. The bug slips into the demon-flower pool and its fate is sealed.*

*I cry for the fly as I crawl on my belly back towards the circle of light that marks the opening to the river and the bridge. Back in my land of strife, my own devil's basket, how will I translate these voiceless phonemes of my encounter? The river, the fruit, the toucan, the howlers, the yellow eyelash, the demon-flower, the fly? The only way I know. I hear with my ears. I see with my eyes. I feel with my skin. And I am story.*

*I cross the tree that is a path. It is raining again and root tendrils pass me as they grow the living bridge.*

## **Conclusion**

### **Limitations and Weaknesses of the Study**

There are several limitations and weakness of this study. First, the number of co-researchers was only four plus me, leaving open the possibility that a greater number of subjects might expose more or different key elements of the ecological writer's experience of Nature. Second, all co-researchers were female opening the possibility that our common experiences are unique to our gender and voice. Third, although we five writers are all published, we write in a variety of genres. While my definition of the ecological writer is not confined to any one genre, there may be distinctions between genre-specific writers' experiences of nature. Finally, a heuristic methodology is specific to examining an experience significant to the primary investigator. Another methodology might take a more measurable approach and methodology in the interest of finding a numeric validation of issues concerning writers' relationship to Nature.

### **Suggestions for Future Study**

In light of the limitations and weaknesses of this study, these are four suggestions for future research to further explore the question. First, using the same heuristic methods, expand the number of co-researchers to improve the generalizability of the results. Second, include both men and women in the study and then illuminate common key elements as well as gender-

specific elements in the results. Third, depart from the constraint of only studying ecological writers to compare and contrast the experience of Nature of writers from different genres. Four, still using the interview format in a qualitative methodology, apply discourse text analysis tools to numerically analyze key vocabulary, use of language, metaphors, transitions, and connectors as revealed in the interviews. In this type of study, the primary investigator is not a participant and, arguably, could eliminate the concern about research bias in heuristic design.

### **Summary**

Our planet has been wounded by the intrusive, unreflective, exploitative acts of humans, but nature holds no malice, and the cosmos creates and destroys in multiple fathomable and unfathomable dimensions. The ecological writers, who graciously participated in this inquiry, feel a calling to express nature's multiplicity through assorted tributaries of the written word. The astounding natural world does not speak human languages, but speaks millions of its own and deserves a translator to help restore human's damaged capacity for empathy and care. How do ecowriters become translators? First by engaging in a perceptually attentive relationship with Nature; in other words, by experiencing what they are writing about. In this study, four wild writers and I explored our relationships to the natural world to expose some core common elements of our experience. After reviewing the literature of the three congruent themes of spirit, nature, and story, my own self-dialogues, and discussions with my co-researchers, I traversed the processes of heuristic inquiry to illuminate seven common experiences of these wild writers:

1. The wild writer experiences Nature as a summons or response from non-human worlds.
2. The wild writer experiences Nature as conversations among all beings in the cosmos.

3. The wild writer experiences Nature as a vast capacity to harm as well as heal.
4. The wild writer experiences Nature with the exterior body.
5. The wild writer experiences Nature with the interior body.
6. The wild writer experiences Nature as the source of imagination.
7. The wild writer experiences Nature with sadness.

These experiences of nature reflect an ongoing re-acquaintanceship between humans and the vast cosmic wonderland in which we participate. The wild writer's wild words reveal a multitude of voices from Nature, calling humans and non-humans to a co-creative relationship on the planet.

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interview, I will ask you about how you 1) experience nature and 2) perceive your ability to write about your experience of nature. And I will be interested in any other comments or reflections you have on being an ecological writer.

I am seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what the writing experience is like for you, including thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your writing. Any logs, journals, or other writing you wish to share would be most welcome.

I believe that through the act of writing humans can pause, reflect, and learn how to express nature from within, becoming significant witnesses for all elements of the biosphere. The importance of eco-writing is immeasurable in an era that desperately needs radical change in the human-environment equation. I value your participation and thank you for your commitment of time, energy, and effort. If you have further questions or need to reach me, my number is 505-699-4747

Cinny Green

## Appendix B

### Platform Principles of Deep Ecology

From Devall, B., & Sessions, G.. (1985). *Deep ecology: Living as if nature mattered*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, p. 70.

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realizations of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to directly or indirectly try to implement the necessary changes.

