THE ESSENCE OF A TACIT INTERSECTION: A HEURISTIC INQUIRY INTO NATURE-BASED LEISURE AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

Emily Johnson

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Supervisor: Colleen Hood, Ph.D.

Faculty of Applied Health Sciences
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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Abstract

There are a considerable number of programs and agencies that count on the existence of a unique relationship between nature and human development. In addition, there are significant bodies of literature dedicated to understanding developmentally focused nature-based experiences. This research project was designed to further the understanding of this phenomenon. Consequently, the purpose of this research endeavour was to discover the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure, culminating in a rich and detailed account of this otherwise tacit phenomenon. As such, this research built on the assumption of this beneficial intersection of nature and personal transformation and contributes to the understanding of how this context is supporting or generating of self-actualization and positive development. Heuristic methods were employed because heuristics is concerned with the quality and essence of an experience, not causal relationships (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic inquiry begins with the primary researcher and her personal experience and knowledge of the phenomenon. This study also involved four other co-researchers who had also experienced this phenomenon intensely. Co-researchers were found through purposeful and snowball sampling. Rich narrative descriptions of their experiences were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and artifact elicitation was employed as a means to get at co-researchers' tacit knowledge. Each co-researcher was interviewed twice (the first interview focused on personal transformation, the second on nature) for approximately four and a half hours in total. Transcripts were read repeatedly to discern patterns that emerged from the study of the narratives and were coded accordingly. Individual narratives were consolidated to create a composite narrative of the experience. Finally, a creative synthesis was developed to represent the essence of this tacit
experience. In conclusion the essence of the intersection of nature-based leisure and personal transformation was found to lie in the convergence of the lived experience of *authenticity*. The physical environment of nature was perceived and experienced to be a space and context of authenticity, leisure experiences were experienced as an engagement of authenticity, and individuals themselves encountered a true or authentic self that emanated from within. The implications of these findings are many, offering suggestions, considerations and implications from reconsidered approaches to environmental education to support for self-directed human development.
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CHAPTER 1

As I understand and experience it, life is a journey. It is an ongoing series of passages, a continual process of understanding and situating oneself, others and the larger world. In my journey thus far, nature has played a significant role, especially in the development of my conception of self, and feeling of connection to this world. Nature has been and remains a place of refuge, renewal, reflection, and retreat in my life. Nature is a place of centering, of reconsidering my self, my ways of relating to my self, and my world. It is a space in which I breathe more consciously and move my body with greater care, compassion, and appreciation. It is a place which is seemingly beyond the everyday and yet the experience of being in and with it, is also experienced as a balanced dichotomy of the familiar and the foreign. In this place, this space, I have often found myself recognizing and encountering my own personal transformation.

Why am I, the primary co-researcher\(^1\) sharing these reflective thoughts? And why, you may ask, have I placed this at the fore? This thesis began with these reflections, because situating myself as a reflexive researcher is a foundational aspect for this heuristic research project. This narrative writing style continues throughout the following chapters in an effort towards transparency and readability. Furthermore, this narrative style of writing allows for the co-researchers' (participants) voices to be heard within a context of a shared perspective, for they too are represented as they presented their experiences - with minimal dissection or over-interpretation by myself, the primary researcher. Additionally, just as I enjoyed conversing with others who have experienced

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\(^1\) Primary co-researcher is terminology used within this research project to name myself amongst the other co-researchers who participated in this study. Further explanation of such terminology can be found in the Definition of Terms section.
the intersection of nature-based leisure and personal transformation, I intend for this to read as a conversation, a dialogue that ultimately seeks to paint a picture of the essence of this phenomenon – the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this research endeavour was to discover the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. The culmination of this heuristic project is a rich and detailed account of this otherwise tacit phenomenon.

This research was based on the developmental perspective that people are inherently good and are seeking meaning, fulfilment, and forward movement in their lives (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1978; Seligman, 2002). Such development is an ongoing process, a gradual movement towards self-actualization. However, this road to self-actualization is not always a smooth journey and many people encounter challenges to their developmental progress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Kleiber, 1999). Thus, this developmental process may also be triggered by an experience or context - the result being an escalated experience of human development, otherwise known as personal transformation. As such, this research contributes to the understanding of how context may support or generate self-actualization and positive development. This will be achieved through describing the phenomenon of an intersection – nature-based leisure and personal transformation.

The optimistic perspective of continual, self-seeking development is most commonly traced to Humanistic Psychology (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1978; Schneider, Bugental & Pierson, 2001) and more recently to Positive Psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993; Seligman, 2002). This perspective has also made its way into leisure literature
(Kleiber, 1999) as well as some therapeutic recreation strategies (Carruthers & Hood, 2004). In some ways this project is an amalgamation of these perspectives, bringing together, in the interest of positive development and self-actualization, a leisure context recognized for its therapeutic value and developmental potential.

**Personal Transformation**

It may be helpful to think of personal transformation as a poignant experience of development - as something that can be felt and experienced. This occurrence is marked by an intense sense of change and a conscious increase in self-awareness and reflective thought (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; C. Hood, personal communication, 2007; Kleiber, 1999). In contrast, more normative development, such as maturity or age-related growth, may only be recognized after a significant period of time or once the person has moved past it (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes & Moore, 2003; Kleiber). Consequently, these age and life-stage developmental patterns are often used as guides for the study and understanding of normative development (Freysinger, 1999; Kleiber). Transformative experiences, on the other hand, are not as predictable as normative, age and life-stage development, and as such, are studied outside of these normative paradigms. One of the common contextualizing strategies used for studying transformative experiences is within the experience of adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; Park & Helgeson, 2006). The reason adversity is a common context for transformation is because adversity acts as a catalyst for reflection on oneself and one's life. This heuristic inquiry into personal transformation and nature-based leisure however, diverges somewhat from both the traditional structures of development and
transformative contexts of adversity to seek a better understanding of transformation within positive experiences.

There are multiple ways in which human development is studied, discussed and defined depending on the academic discipline, body of literature and ontological perspective. Additionally, individuals may experience and understand personal transformation in varying ways. Thus, personal transformation as a surge of human development is subject to diversity in its definition and means of personal comprehension. Some examples of bodies of literature that discuss personal transformation include: psychology, spirituality, post-traumatic growth, and transformative learning. Although there are a variety of perspectives, one point common to all concepts of personal transformation is the idea of people experiencing a significant and meaningful change. This change could be felt and recognized within one’s sense of self, relationships with others and/or philosophy of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). I will be using these concepts of “significant, meaningful change” as well as the three-fold dimensions of that change noted above, as the baseline for understanding personal transformation.

Nature-Based Leisure

I use the terminology of nature-based leisure in order to be inclusive of experiences such as painting in the outdoors, or practicing walking meditation in nature that may not fall under the usual outdoor recreation umbrella. Regardless of the activity, nature-based leisure encompasses a particular physical place as well as a particular mind-space and type of lived experience.
Leisure is recognized as an experience laden with potential for growth, self-definition, development and healing (Carruthers & Hood, 2004; Kleiber, 1999; Kleiber et al., 2002; Privette, 2001); however not all leisure experiences (e.g. television) have the same potential for growth. There are many factors that contribute to the quality of a leisure experience in terms of its ability to inspire a developmental outcome. These factors range from motivational drives and the extent of investment, to the social structure and context or physical environment (Jackson & Burton, 1999; Kleiber). For this study, the context and physical environment are of particular interest in defining developmentally productive leisure experiences (Smale, 1999).

Nature is gaining recognition as a context and space to counter modern ailments of stress, depression and isolation and is believed to enhance well-being (Burns, 2005; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Lloyd & Little, 2005; Louv, 2005). Spending time in nature and enjoying a sense of quiet and solitude, or appreciating the beauty of a river or landscape has calming and therapeutic attributes (Burns; Kaplan & Kaplan; Lloyd & Little). In addition, the characteristics of nature-based leisure experiences may also include a social environment which allows for role relaxation and experimentation, a sense of relief and separation from daily life, along with a reduction in time pressures and associated commitments (Lloyd & Little; McDermott, 2004; Warren, 1996). Consequently, a person may have more time for reflection and enjoy a sense of freedom and connection to nature, experiences which have been linked to spiritually transcendent or transformative experiences (Williams & Harvey, 2001). As such, nature-based leisure is contextually and experientially rich with potential for promoting or fostering personal growth and development.
An argument can also be made for the importance and timeliness of seeking a better understanding of the ways in which humans benefit from, connect-to, interact-with, and are changed by nature (Humberstone, 1998). Climate change, pollution, the disconnection between humans and nature (Gillespie & Kalinowski, 2006; Louv, 2005; Suzuki & McConnell, 1997), and natural disasters regularly make headline news, and are the focus of much scientific debate. Amidst this growing public concern for the natural environment, there is also an increasing desire to seek out experiences with nature in varying capacities (Manning, 1999; Plummer, 2005). With this much attention and interest directed towards the natural environment, it is a fitting time to be seeking a better understanding of positive outcomes from human interactions with nature.

*The Intersection*

People believe in the connection between nature-based leisure and personal transformation. The evidence of this lies in the considerable number of programs counting on or hoping for the existence of a unique relationship between nature and human development: therapeutic wilderness programs (e.g. Second Nature Wilderness Programs, Kaitou Wilderness Therapy); nature-based retreat centres (e.g. Northern Edge Algonquin); adventure programs (e.g. Outward Bound, Boundless); and even eco-tourism destinations (e.g. Frontiers North - Tundra Buggy Adventures). All of these programs count on, assume, or support the existence of a unique relationship between nature and human development. There are also significant bodies of literature dedicated to these nature-based experiences: adventure therapy; outdoor education; transference; and sense of place to name a few. As a collective, these bodies of literature speak to a unique relationship between nature-based leisure and personal transformation, however not much
literature exists describing the essence of this intersection (Brooks, Wallace & Williams, 2006; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Manzo, 2005; Williams & Harvey, 2001). This research builds on the assumption of this beneficial intersection and contributes to the understanding of how this context supports or generates self-actualization and positive development. This is achieved through addressing the central research question: What is the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure? This research culminates in a detailed description of the essence of this intersection. To aid in the reading of this research project I have provided a definition of terms section below to clarify any language and terminology that the reader needs to be familiar with as they progress through this research project.

*Definition of Terms*

Backcountry – This word could be interchanged with “wilderness area” or other terms for remote natural places that have been largely undisturbed or unaffected by human influence and development.

Co-researcher – Co-researcher is heuristic term for a “participant” within heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). This terminology is used in order to demonstrate that co-researcher voices are equally alongside the person conducting the research, the “primary co-researcher”.

Constructivist Paradigm - Constructionism takes the ontological perspective that all people create meaning in their lives on a continual basis, through a sort of cyclical social and self-production, reproduction, and internalization of socially constructed norms, expectations, roles and thus, of society (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 2002; Rossman; 1998). From this perspective the world and social order is viewed as dynamic, malleable, relational, and reactive.

Daimon – A Hellenic word meaning “this is who I really am”, it is a person’s true self, it is an excellence of self that people are meant to strive for in pursuit of meaning and direction (Waterman, 1990, 1993).

Epochal and Incremental Transformation – Epochal transformation is an instantaneous awareness of something that prior to that moment a person had no conception of. In more simple terms it is an “ah-ha” moment of coming to understanding and
awareness. Incremental transformation on the other hand is a slow, progressive coming to awareness and understanding of a certain topic or concept, there is no specific, stand-out “ah-ha” moment, but instead a series of non-descript expansions of understanding that culminate in a new awareness or understanding (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006).

Eudaimomia – “Eudaimonism is an ethical theory that calls upon people to recognize and live in accordance with the daimon or ‘true self’” (Waterman, 1990, p. 52).

Flow – A flow state is where people feel perfectly in tune with their environment and activity, experiencing a harmonious balance between personal challenge, enjoyment and satisfaction, and an intense state of engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Heuristic Research – Heuristic research is a qualitative, phenomenological type of research. The primary question for heuristic researchers is “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (Patton, 2002, p. 107). It is concerned with describing the essence of a phenomenon by uncovering the tacit knowledge of people who have experienced the phenomenon intensely.

Leisure - In general terms for this study, leisure is understood as a context of freedom where a person engages with a pursuit which is personally meaningful and truly expressive of one’s individuality or sense of self (Neulinger, 1981). It is a time free from obligation and a mind-space of both focused engagement with the experience and disengagement from the rest of one’s life (Kleiber, 1999). As such, leisure can be best understood within three framing concepts: time, activity, and experience.

Narrative Writing – Some forms of narrative writing “engage the reader through a chronological approach as events unfold slowly over time, whether the subject is a study of a culture-sharing group, the narrative of the life of an individual, or the evolution of a program” (Creswell, 1998, p. 168). I have written this thesis from the perspective of accompanying the reader along the research journey, the entire research process being an unfolding chronology and development in the understanding of the phenomenon. My voice narrates the entire project, in an effort to assure the reader that I am aware of and purposeful in my place within the research. A narrative approach to this project also seemed appropriate because I am embedded within the research as an equal subject of study and have knowledge of the phenomenon in question.

Nature-based Leisure – I have adopted the term nature-based leisure in order to be more inclusive of the wide variety of ways of interacting with and participating nature-based activities. Nature-based leisure is about bringing together the state of mind, and experience of leisure within the unique environment and context of nature.
Nature-based leisure is about partaking in an endeavour for the equal purposes of interacting with the environment and context of nature, as well as participating in a desired activity or pastime. I have chosen to use the term *nature-based leisure* for the purpose of distinguishing it from outdoor recreation, which is often associated with specific experiences and activities such as canoeing or rock-climbing, leaving little room for alternative leisure experiences with nature.

Pause - A lived experience where “the person’s life response no longer blindly follows stimulus. There intervenes between the two our human imaginings, reflections, considerations, ponderings. Pause is the prerequisite for wonder. When we don’t pause, when we are perpetually hurrying from one appointment to another, from one “planned activity” to another, we sacrifice the richness of wonder” (May, 1981, p. 167).

Personal Transformation – There are numerous definitions of personal transformation; my working definition was as follows: An experience of meaningful change in sense of self, relationships, and philosophy of life, which may be purposefully sought or unexpectedly encountered by way of a significant positive or negative life event, whose impact may be either incremental or epochal.

Phenomenon – A phenomenon is defined as “that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is – and without which it could not be what it is” (Hursserl, 1982; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, cited in van Manen, 1997, p. 10). The phenomenon in question for this researcher was the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure.

Primary co-researcher - This is the terminology used within this heuristic research project to name myself amongst the other co-researchers who participated in this study. This use of language is standard for heuristic research, purposefully assigning equalizing terminology to co-researchers (participants) and primary-co-researcher(s) (researcher(s)) alike.

Readability – This refers to the attempt by the writer-researcher to put forward a written document which is reader-friendly, being equally accessible to those who are familiar with this topic and those who are not.

Rich, In-depth, Thick Description – The purpose of rich, in-depth and thick description is to give the reader a comprehensive picture of the situation from which the findings have come. By providing such description, the reader is able to decide for himself/herself whether the findings are applicable to his/her own specific situation (Creswell, 1998; Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002).

Tacit – Tacit knowledge is knowledge that people possess but may have trouble expressing. It is the idea that people can know more than they can share (Polanyi, 1966). Tacit knowledge often includes feelings, emotions and physical
The text on this page is not legible due to the quality of the image. It appears to be a page from a document, but the content cannot be accurately transcribed.
ways of knowing about a concept, along with cognitive understanding. It is “that internal place where experience, feeling, and meaning join together to form both a picture of the world and a way to navigate that world” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 60).

Transparency – “Transparency is an attempt to demonstrate the credibility of qualitative research evidence by allowing the reader to ‘see through’ the researchers’ decision-making and their analytical approach to the data. This is accomplished by leaving an audit trail, a record of the researcher’s design decisions, as the study progresses, about gaining access, selection of field role, choice of participants, ethical considerations, and analytical methods” (Holloway, 2005, p. 6). When I comment that I have done something “in an effort towards transparency”, I am saying that I am making an effort to be clear and accountable. I most often discuss my efforts towards transparency in terms of my rational, personal views, how I employed heuristic methods, the choices I made in formatting the presentation of findings in chapters 4, 5, and 6, and my own personal self-study.
CHAPTER 2

There are many ways to understand this study’s framing concepts of personal transformation, leisure, and nature. As such, this literature review includes an intentional selection of theories and perspectives of personal transformation, leisure, and nature that inform and contribute directly to this research project. The theories and perspectives attended to in the following pages were guided by the following beliefs held by myself, the primary co-researcher:

- I believe people are good and moving forward towards self-actualization, although not all in the same way or at the same time.

- I believe people are continually making meaning of their experiences and as such their sense of self and place in the world is continually evolving.

- I believe leisure is a context for development, and discovery and enactment of personal authenticity.

- I believe nature can enhance well-being and can be effectively used as a context for growth.

*Personal Transformation*

In an effort to describe my own transformative experiences, I searched within various bodies of existing literature to find a match. What I found instead were pieces of my own understanding and experience within varying bodies of literature. Given that this research is following the heuristic methodology, I was not charged with the task of defining this experience at the outset, but instead, to patiently wait for the essence of the experience to reveal itself through the data (Moustakas, 1990). As such, with this literature review I did not seek to define personal transformation, but instead I engaged in a brief description of a selection of ways in which this concept has been discussed and I
identified how these perspectives inform this study. My own working definition of personal transformation was arrived at through a difficult task of considering the many ways of studying and understanding personal transformation. In the end, Positive Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Post Traumatic Growth and Transformative Learning theories informed both my working definition and the following review of literature.

**Working Definition:** An experience of meaningful change in sense of self, relationships, and philosophy of life, which may be purposefully sought or unexpectedly encountered by way of a significant positive or negative life event, whose impact may be either incremental or epochal.

*A Wide Variety of Perspectives*

There is a significant amount of research and literature dedicated to human experiences of growth, development and transformation. A considerable amount of this literature centers on negative or traumatic life events and how they may inspire or require personal changes. Less attention has been paid to the power of positive experiences to catalyze personal growth, transformation and development. This review will aim to cover a sample of the spectrum of perspectives, from positive to negative and the views in between.

Humanistic psychology was chosen out of the many psychological perspectives for two reasons: first, because of it’s grounding in the human drive for meaning in life and forward movement and second, because the concept of self-actualization was born out of this perspective. Post-traumatic growth gives valuable insights into the ways in
which people can flourish when confronting adversity. Most importantly however, it centers on peoples’ ability to redefine and reconceptualize when they encounter a life event which shatters the foundations of their life assumptions (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Kleiber et al. 2002; Mobily & Ostiguy, 2004). Transformative learning is based on the idea that the human ability to learn goes beyond simple subject matter comprehension to the capacity to internalize learning experiences resulting in holistically developmental encounters. This perspective highlights the potential for purposeful learning to inspire greater awareness and deeper consideration of self along with the subject matter (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006; Kovan & Dirkx, 2005). Finally, the relatively new movement of positive psychology contributes a belief in the human desire to seek out and exercise capacities by way of an ongoing search for context and experience that bolster self-awareness, pleasure and meaning making (Bornstein et al., 2003; Emmons, 2003; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Seligman, 2002).

**Humanistic Psychology.** The humanistic tradition of psychology was founded by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers who believed in the basic goodness of people and their innate drive for personal growth, development, and ultimately, self-actualization (Franken, 2002; Halgin & Whitbourne, 2003). This is an optimistic view of human nature, believing that the responsibility of and recognition for developmental progress belongs to the individual (Baron, Earhard & Ozier, 1998). The humanistic perspective is concerned with understanding how people come to progress through developmental stages, moving towards self-actualization. In seeking this understanding, humanistic psychologists and researchers seek to “to unveil the ‘guts,’ core, or essence of what it
means to be vitally human” (Schneider et al., 2001, p. 49). To be able to get at this “core” or essence, this perspective takes a holistic approach to the human experience and mind, body, spirit, and tacit knowledge are all valued as worthy components of the human lived experience (Szasz, 2001).

In terms of growth, development and personal transformation, the humanistic perspective centers on people’s capacity and drive for self-actualization. This concept of self-actualization was developed by Maslow (1968) and is defined as

the ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities, and talents, as fulfillment of mission (or call, fate, destiny, or vocation), as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person’s own intrinsic nature, as an increasing trend toward unity, integration, or synergy within the person.

(p. 25)

Halgin and Whitbourne (2003) provide a more descriptive account of Maslow’s concept of the self-actualized person:

the maximum realization of the individual’s potential for psychological growth....self-actualized people are accurate in their self-perceptions and are able to find rich sources of enjoyment and stimulation in their everyday activities. They are capable of peak experiences in which they feel a tremendous surge of inner happiness, as if they were totally in harmony with themselves and their world....They also have a philosophy of life that is based on humanitarian and egalitarian values. (p. 118)

However, to achieve self-actualization, Maslow (1968) outlined a series of needs which must first be met; this is called the “hierarchy of needs”. The essential premise of this
hierarchy is that first the basics of life must be satisfied before a person can progress to self-actualization. Of course, progress towards this “maximum realization” of development will vary from person to person, depending on their life circumstances. What Maslow has provided is a developmental endpoint, however the route or journey to self-actualization is not firmly outlined.

There is not just one route to self-actualization. People could self-actualize after long and meaningful lives of progressive learning and “age-appropriate” development. On the other hand, it is equally viable that people could come to self-actualization by way of a transformative life experience which causes them to reconsider their life and the very structures or assumptions upon which they have built their life: sense of who they are, their purpose, relationships, and place in the world. Regardless of which developmental progression people experience, the end result is the same – self-actualization. This line of thinking is within the realm of interest of current humanistic theorizing, as stated by Feinstein (2001),

this framework is capable of accommodating the farther and more noble ‘reaches of human nature’ (Maslow, 1971) that conventional psychology has tended to neglect but humanistic psychology has tended to embrace, including scientifically slippery areas such as consciousness, values, love, identity, freedom, will and self-transcendence. (p. 181)

Furthermore, humanistic psychology values the latent potential of positive experiences to inspire or shift human development towards self-actualization. Privette (2001) expressed this idea of the developmental potential of positive experiences or optimal moments in the
following, “as self-actualization is prototypic of healthy personality, peak performance\(^2\) and peak experience are prototypic of positive experiences. Optimal moments are interesting in their own right and, as pole stars, give direction for our human possibilities” (p. 162). Clearly then, personal transformation can be understood to be a latent potential within optimal experiences that could steer a person towards self-actualization.

Humanistic psychology informed this study in two ways. First, humanistic psychology is grounded in the optimistic view that people are good and moving forward, making meaning of their lived experiences. Secondly, humanistic psychology offers a developmental endpoint or goal – self-actualization, “the maximum realization of the individual’s potential for psychological growth” (Halgin & Whitbourne, 2003, p. 118). Personal transformation (or self-transcendent experiences) can then be understood as a valuable experience that may accelerate a person’s developmental progression towards self-actualization.

*Post-Traumatic Growth.* Post-traumatic growth occurs when a person has experienced a traumatic life event that becomes, “an occasion for reappraising one’s self, life, values, and goals” (Kleiber et al. 2002, p. 221). In the simplest terms, this traumatic event becomes the marker of a “before” and “after” in the person’s life. These changes may be evidenced by cognitive, behavioural, emotional and spiritual dimensions of growth. Post-traumatic growth can be experienced in various ways: “changing schemas, altering personal narratives, and developing a greater degree of what can be called wisdom…growth may be best viewed as multidimensional” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998,

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\(^2\)“Peak performance, the perfect moment when mind, muscle and movement come together, and *peak experience*, a precious moment of highest happiness and joy, are personally valued experiences. We cherish these times, enjoy remembering them, and intuitively expect that they can enlighten our lives” (Privette, 2001, p.161).
As such, from the perspective of adversity, post-traumatic growth offers many worthy insights into personal transformation.

Post-traumatic growth gives a perspective on transformation that begins with an overwhelmingly negative experience which leads to significant, multi-dimensional changes that involves self-concept, relationships, and outlook on and meaning of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998). However, for people to be moved to or through such a significant change, they must encounter some circumstance which shakes the foundation of their assumptive world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). This shaking of the foundations of people's worlds may motivate them to take the steps towards change because of unrelenting feelings of discomfort and vulnerability (Mobily & Ostiguy, 2004). These changes could involve both cognitive and behavioural processes. Furthermore, these changes do not result solely from the trauma, but from positive experiences and emotions that are experienced post-trauma. Positive emotions and experiences provide a release and buffer from the immense associated stress (Folkman, 1997; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). As such, positive experiences such as leisure are recognized as a means by which people come to recognize new strengths and begin to build new communities of support and ways of defining themselves and understanding their world (Kleiber, 1999; Mobily & Ostiguy).

Post-traumatic growth informed this study by providing some structure to the understanding of personal transformation as discussed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998), perceived growth tends to be reported in three general domains: changes in perception of self, changed relationships with others, and a changed philosophy of life that includes a deeper appreciation for life, along with

I used this definition as a scaffold upon which co-researchers and I began to construct the essence of personal transformation. When soliciting participants, the three-fold dimensions of personal transformation (e.g. self, relationships and philosophy of life) as described by Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998), were how I described the potential transformative outcomes of nature-based leisure experiences may have been encountered. I communicated the idea of personal transformation in this three-dimensional way, as it was broad enough to not influence or unintentionally restructure the way in which a co-researcher may construe their experience, but specific enough to allow them to recognize whether or not they in fact have experienced what I was seeking to study. This concept of self-identification of growth or transformation is a commonly accepted practice within post-traumatic growth research and reflects the value of narrative understandings of self, growth and transformation (Calhoun & Tedeschi).

Post-traumatic growth further informed this study in two broad and related ways. As discussed earlier, post-traumatic growth is due to the structures and assumptions of a person’s world being shattered causing emotional, behaviour and cognitive discomfort and disorientation. In consequence, social roles, relations with others, and sense of self may be completely reshaped in the healing and recovery from the traumatic event. This healing and reorganization of one’s life can be understood as a significant experience of growth – as personal transformation. This study, while concerned with positive experiences, had the same basis for transformative experiences. Positive experiences
such as nature-based leisure can also have this disorienting and change-motivating dimension, it has simply been less common to examine positive experiences in this light.

*Transformative Learning.* Transformative learning is an approach to adult education which values the potential for holistic development and transformation through learning. From this perspective, learning is not simply the acquisition of information it is a merging or integration of the experience of inner worlds of meaning-making, emotion and tactic knowing and outer worlds of information and lived experiences (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006; Kovan & Dirkx, 2005). As such, experiences are seen as a form of learning, and learning as a way of shifting or expanding people’s concept of self and their world. Additionally, transformative learning theorist Mezirow stated that such outcomes of shifted sense of self or world could be either “epochal or incremental” (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006, p. 125). Furthermore, Mezirow believed that whether the transformation was epochal or incremental, the context for said change usually involved both objective and subjective reframing within a positive, supportive environment (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton). Thus, the transformative learning concepts of epochal or incremental growth, subjective and objective reframing, and the integration of inner and outer worlds, were concepts which informed the experience of personal transformation and the potential within contexts such as nature-based leisure.

Transformative learning’s recognition of the dual potentials of epochal and incremental transformation is similar to the humanistic perspective that movement towards self-actualization may involve either intensive or progressive experiences of development. Furthermore, non-normative and intensive experiences of development have often been overshadowed by a focus on age-related growth, or they are
contextualized within experiences of adversity (i.e. post traumatic growth). Thus, transformative learning makes an important contribution to the understanding of personal transformation by valuing these “epochal” or personally transformative experiences of growth and development.

Transformative learning theory outlines two potential needs for transformative learning to occur. It “may involve objective (often task-oriented) or subjective (often self-reflective) reframing. Subjective reframing often requires the support of others, a positive self-concept and freedom from intense anxiety” (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006, p. 125). Nature-based leisure is much like a transformative learning context, for it is often an experience and activity which is outside of a person’s usual routine and task set (objective reframing) and it is also a time and experience which may foster self-reflection (subjective reframing) (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006). Thus, a leisure experience can be easily seen as an optimal situation for a transformative experience.

Transformative learning theory values more than what presents itself to people’s cognitive awareness. Emotion, tacit knowing and “inner work” are equally valued dimensions of transformative learning (Kovan & Dirkx, 2004, p. 144). Transformative learning theory moves beyond many traditional psychological and educational theories by embracing “complex social, emotional, and spiritual processes involved in deep inner work and the processes of transformative learning” (O’Sullivan et al., 2002, as cited in Kovan & Dirkx, p. 144). This focus on “deep inner work” and ability for people to experience personal transformation beyond a conscious process is in line with this study’s assumption that there is a tacit dimension to the ways by which people understand and benefit from nature-based leisure experiences.
Additionally, transformative learning points to the ability for a shift in one area, such as gaining insight through informational knowledge, to impact a person’s life beyond the initial setting. In this way, the transformative learning perspective informs the potential for a meaningful leisure encounter to inspire a change in a person that goes beyond the specific experience.

Transformative learning contributes to the understanding of personal transformation and the valuing of positive experiences in many ways. This study embraced two dimensions of the transformative learning perspective. First, development can be an experience that is either epochal or incremental, and second that learning and growth is a holistic experience, impacting the person beyond the single learning event, integrating all dimensions of the inner world with the experiences of the outer world.

Positive Psychology. Positive psychology moves away from the traditional approach of understanding human behaviour from a perspective of deficit and dysfunction to looking at factors that contribute to well-being and thriving. Positive psychology embraces the notion that “human beings have the potential for ‘good,’ and that we are motivated to pursue a ‘good life’” (Linley & Joseph, 2004, p. 714). Further, it is believed that people are continually moving towards the full realization of their potential and by doing so they “are truly living rather than merely existing” (Keyes & Haidt, 2003, p. 6).

This full-realization of potential is sought through the exercising of one’s capacities by way of an ongoing search for contexts and experiences which foster success, pleasure, increased self-awareness and capacity (Seligman, 2002). Additionally, it is the individual’s ability to make meaning of those experiences that lead to the full-
realization of potential (Bornstein et al., 2003; Emmons, 2003). To make meaning of one’s life and experiences is intricately tied to the environment or context from which the meaning evolved. For this reason there is a growing interest in the relationship between environment and meaning-making (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Within positive psychology, the ultimate experience of meaning-making could be said to be captured within the experience of a *turning point*, defined as moments of redirection and reconsideration of one’s self and one’s life (Clausen, 1995; Wethington, 2003).

Just as experiences of adversity can act as catalysts for personal growth, so too can positive engagements. Positive experiences enhance feelings of competence and self-worth, they foster creative expression and personal authenticity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Seligman, 2003). Through affirmation of a person’s worth and abilities, such experiences may also provide a context for exploration and expansion of self-concept and worldview (Kleiber, 1999). Thus, positive experiences hold the potential for personally transformative experiences by way of meaning making within an affirming and/or self-expanding experience.

Within positive psychology, some scholars (Wethington, 2003) have taken to discussing *turning points* as important experiences of development. Turning points, as distinct experiences of development are gaining research attention because of their ability to highlight not only positive coping characteristics but also positive contexts for change (Clausen, 1995). Turning points are regarded much the same as this study’s definition of personal transformation, as “a major transformation in views about the self, identity, or the meaning of life” (Wethington, p. 37). Although turning points are usually studied within the context of age-related development and changes they are not limited to
application in those contexts; "in fact, Clausen (1998) found that many of the most enduring turning points were triggered by positive events" (Wethington, 2003, p. 40). Clausen (1995) attributed the psychological growth of turning points to people’s ability to construct meaning from lived experiences. Consequently the preferred means for studying turning points is through multiple in-depth interviews that elicit the narratives that individuals construct around their experiences.

Meaning-making is a distinguishing quality and ability of humans; “people are capable of actively forming goals, investing their attention selectively, and constructing the meaning of their experience…. people a[re] active shapers as well as products of their own experience...” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 84). Meaning making is of central interest within positive psychology because meaning-making is linked to quality of life, subjective well-being (Emmons, 2003) and self-awareness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi). Meaning-making is the manner by which all experiences come to challenge or be incorporated into a person’s life narrative, including a positive or negative evaluation of self-concept and worldview. One of the dimensions of this complex process of meaning-making is the relationship between a person and the environment and more specifically, the way that a person experiences that environment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi). In this study, the focus is this very intersection of lived experience and environment – the intersection of personal transformation and nature. By seeking to better understand the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure, this study contributes to the growing body of literature dedicated to the ways in which positive life experiences contribute to development and well-being.
Leisure

Definition and Description

Leisure is a concept, a frame of mind, a pursuit, and word which eludes consensus in its definition. In general terms for this study, leisure is understood as a context of freedom where a person engages with a pursuit which is personally meaningful and truly expressive of one's individuality or sense of self (Neulinger, 1981). It is a time free from obligation and a mind-space of both focused engagement with the experience and disengagement from the rest of one's life (Kleiber, 1999). As such, leisure can be best understood within three framing concepts: time, activity, and experience.

Time. Leisure is a time when people experience freedom from the obligations, responsibilities and expectations that structure their everyday lives. In western society, time away from work is the most common association of what free time entails. Time away from family however, can be an equally important aspect of true free time, especially for women for whom leisure-type experiences with family, such as a day at the beach may be experienced as another form of work (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw & Freysinger, 1999). Furthermore, in that time away from work, family or other commitments the person must be free of feelings of guilt, anxiety or other feelings which draw them emotionally and cognitively away from the experience itself (Kleiber, 1999). Thus leisure, in its truest form is an expression and experience of perceived personal freedom, almost regardless of what the exact activity may be (Neulinger, 1981).

Activity. The possibilities for leisure activities are innumerable, from highly physical, adrenaline inducing activities such as surfing or mountain biking, to quieter activities such as knitting or gardening. People choose amongst these widely varying
leisure possibilities based on varying needs and desires. For example a person may feel the need for individual adventure or challenge; on the other hand, a person may desire familiarity and social bonding. Furthermore a person may be driven by a need for escape from everyday life, or the need to express ones talents (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Kleiber, 1999).

Depending on the needs and desires people are seeking to fulfil their choices will vary along a continuum from a serious activity such as a club-team sport, or a free-flowing and non-committal activity, or an exploratory first-time pursuit. Leisure activity choices will also vary depending on a person’s desire for socialization or autonomy. Yet another dimension of the leisure experience is the environment or context. The work of Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) and Minnegal (1996) attest to the impact of environment on behaviour and the connection between environmental preference and social expectations and social behaviour. Whether it is an active pursuit such as rock-climbing or swimming, or a more contemplative or expressive activity such as reading or painting, these experiences may be impacted by the setting, whether indoor or outdoor, done in a city-setting or wilderness area.

Experience. The lived experience of leisure is multidimensional, involving motivations, a sense of freedom, feelings of expressiveness, experience of pleasure, changed perception of self and a change in overall perspective (Kleiber, 1999). Thus, the experience of leisure is an important element to understand.

The experience of leisure is rooted in the perception of freedom as previously discussed within the context of time. Freedom in the context of leisure refers to people’s feelings of having control over the parameters of their experience, as well as the emotional and cognitive freedom from other stressors and responsibilities. This
perceived freedom is central to the experience of leisure, allowing people to fully experience their anticipated pleasure derived from an intrinsically motivated activity (Kleiber, 1999).

In the words of Kleiber (1999), leisure is, “the combination of free time and the expectation of preferred experience” (p. 3). This definition of leisure points to the foundational concept of intrinsic motivation. For if an activity is the result of a person acting out of free will, without constraint or coercion and with anticipation of an enjoyable or meaningful experience, then that person can be said to be intrinsically motivated. Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is driven by the expectation of pleasure, simple pleasure derived from engaging in the activity itself.

By outlining the framing concepts of leisure – time, activity, and experience – it is easier to understand the value of nature-based leisure experiences and the transformative potential that they hold. The positive outcomes of leisure stem from these framing concepts, as the experience of leisure, as an intrinsically chosen activity that is in a time separate from the rest of a persons life, sets the stage for not only an enjoyable experience, but for an experience rich with developmentally unique potential.

Positive Outcomes of Leisure

Just as the possibilities for leisure engagement are many and varied, so too are the potential positive outcomes. Ibrahim and Cordes (2002), in their discussion of leisure benefits, provided an exhaustive list of potential positive outcomes including: social contact, relationships with nature, learning/discovery, reflection on personal values, creativity, physical exercise, achievement, affiliation, cooperation, and nurturance, among others. For the purpose of this study however, three areas of specific relevance to
personal transformation and nature-based leisure will be discussed: Engagement and Disengagement, Leisure and Development, and Leisure and Identity Formation. I chose to highlight these three areas because they may be of central importance in explaining how nature-based leisure experiences may set the stage for personal transformation.

*Engagement and disengagement.* Leisure as a frame of mind is an experience and space rich with potential for exploring one’s self, one’s social environment and other possible ways of being and perceiving the world and one’s self. This context of potential is partly due to the somewhat dichotomous leisure concept of *engagement* and *disengagement* (Kleiber, 1999). When people are participating in a leisure pursuit they are engaged in that time, context and experience and in the same moment, they are disengaged from their usual lives.

Engagement in a leisure experience can open up different ways of interacting with the social and physical environment and can also result in a different way of experiencing one’s self (Kleiber, 1999). For example, people may begin to see themselves as a creative, expressive and relaxed group member within a knitting circle, while simultaneously disengaging with their role of strict parent, identity of lawyer and lived experience of life being ruled by the clock. The engagement with the leisure experience provides an opportunity to explore one’s self outside of the everyday experience.

The ways in which people experience leisure engagement will vary but often the concept of *flow* is affiliated with leisure. A flow state is where people feel perfectly in tune with their environment and activity, experiencing a harmonious balance between personal challenge, enjoyment and satisfaction, and an intense state of engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Usually a flow state is associated with more physical activities
such as running but it could also occur with something less physical such as scrapbooking. Although flow is a popular concept, leisure may also be an experience of pause, a term coined by Rollo May (1981), where there is mindful appreciation and quiet contemplation of what is and the freedom to wonder what could be. Within the leisure context Kleiber (1999) suggested that "pause", an experience of relative and momentary disengagement, is of developmental interest. Pause is an experience rich with transformative potential, for as May (1981) explained it,

the person’s life response no longer blindly follows stimulus. There intervenes between the two our human imaginings, reflections, considerations, ponderings. Pause is the prerequisite for wonder. When we don’t pause, when we are perpetually hurrying from one appointment to another, from one “planned activity” to another, we sacrifice the richness of wonder. (p. 167)

This pause may be an experience many Westerners lacked as many are time-strapped and constantly tuned into the external world of television, email, and cell phones, busily rushing from work to school to home and out running all the errands that keep a modern Western life ticking. Accordingly, a leisure activity that promotes or fosters engagement of a pause-type would be of value for those who otherwise don’t pause, and thus may not have an experience of “wonder”. These concepts of “pause” and “wonder” are much like the concepts discussed regarding personal transformation, of integrating inner and outer worlds, of becoming self-aware and thus able to consider who one is, or one’s place in the world.
Leisure is a time, experience, and activity outside of a person’s everyday life and as such it is a time of disengagement from everyday experience. Responsibilities, social roles, rules, time constraints, and other limiting and determining factors of a person’s daily life experience may be absent from the leisure experience. This disengagement is part of the resulting perception of freedom and control over the experience and the anticipated outcome of pleasure, a state which Kleiber (1999) referred to as “relaxed openness”. This condition is said to have the potential to expand people’s repertoire of possibilities in defining themselves in their everyday life. Without disengagement, people may remain clouded by the responsibilities and stressors of daily life and not be fully open and able to engage in their activity of choice. Disengagement makes way for full engagement and the expansion of the realm of possibilities for the ways in which people can (re)create, renew or (re)discover the ways in which they experience their world through leisure.

**Leisure and development.** Leisure is a context laden with developmental potential and a space for the maximization and realization of human potential. According to Kleiber (1999), leisure goes beyond providing people with pleasure and enjoyment, giving them the space for the discovery of potential, the actualization of authentic self-expression and a context for self-directed development. Kleiber also discusses four specific ways in which leisure relates to development: *derivative; adjustive; generative;* and *maladaptive*. Leisure may be a *derivative* of other developmental processes or experiences; it may be *adjustive*, helping people to adapt to life pressures and events; it could be *generative* of developmental change; or it may be *maladaptive* and hinder development. The first three possibilities all hold potential for positive development
helping people to adjust to new circumstances, grow through times of challenge and find greater meaning and untapped potential in themselves and their lives. Of particular interest in this research project was the notion of leisure as generative of developmental change, for leisure experiences can provide opportunities to explore one's self, an experience which may inspire or catalyze development (Kleiber).

Kleiber (1999) stated that, "leisure offers conditions for optimizing human development and self-actualization. This position is based on two premises: (1) that leisure is a context of relative freedom for self-expression; and (2) that development can be at least partially self-directed" (p. 16). The first point is based on the idea that true leisure is intrinsically motivated and thus the participant is within a chosen activity and context, and feels to some extent that the activity is reflective of a value or interest. In a similar vein, Kraus (1984) said that leisure can provide an arena in which personal values are shaped and thus a context in which an individual may reach their highest potential. Flowing from this concept, is Kleiber's second suggestion that leisure is then at least partially self-directed, for if an activity is intrinsically motivated and engaged in within at least a context of perceived freedom then the activity must be self-directed to some extent. Thus, any form of development resulting from that leisure experience is arguably, self-directed development.

Oftentimes development is seen mainly as an age-related process, an almost automatic process that unfolds across the lifespan. Self-directed development however is an overlooked and underappreciated phenomenon which relates closely to this study's interest in personal transformation – a form of expedited development. The leisure context is especially important for self-directed development, and Kleiber (1999)
effectively discussed the work of the following psychologists in relation to the
developmental opportunities of leisure. Norma Haan said, “...development follows from
‘curiosity and attempts to enhance life’” (as cited in Kleiber, 1999, p. 20). Curiosity is
what may inspire a person to explore a new leisure pursuit, and that pursuit may be what
Rolf Oerter called a nonnormative task, or what Brian Little called a personal project
(Kleiber). Nonnormative tasks and personal projects are experiences, activities and
learning opportunities which people choose of their own volition for various reasons but
which ultimately serve as developmental experiences. Whether people are interested in
acquiring new skills, joining a club, learning a new language or sport or simply taking
daily walks in a local park, their leisure activities can be understood as tasks or projects
that ultimately foster development.

The view of this research is that personal transformation is a form of
nonnormative development, as it is not age-related or necessarily associated with a
predictable developmental progression. Furthermore, leisure as a known space for
nonnormative development, and nature as a pause-inducing environment, come together
to suggest that nature-based leisure experiences may provide a context for non-normative
development of a reflective and wonder-producing kind.

*Leisure and identity formation.* Leisure provides a framework for engaging with
a new context and thus, possibly also with a different experience of self due to the
shedding of the roles, responsibilities and other defining factors associated with everyday
life. In this way, leisure is a space for the exploration of self, creative discovery and
enactment, and the (re)formation of identity. In Kleiber’s (1999) words, “It is reasonable
to expect that identifying one’s interests and following them with enthusiasm would have
The presentation's content is excellent.

As you can see, the data is well-organized and easy to understand. The graphs are clear and the statistics are presented in a way that makes it easy to draw conclusions.

In terms of the design, I think it's a little too busy. There are too many different colors and fonts, which can be overwhelming for the audience. I would suggest simplifying the design to make it more visually appealing.

Overall, I think this is a strong presentation. The information is presented clearly and the visuals are effective. Thank you for your hard work.
an important place in both self-definition and self-development” (p. 93). The following discussion of such development will follow the framing concepts of self-awareness, self-expression, and identity congruence.

Leisure is an intrinsically motivated activity which is, in some way, a reflection or expression of a person’s current sense of self, or idealized sense of self. By engaging in a personally expressive, intrinsically motivated leisure activity, people are able explore their interests and thus (re)discover and (re)define their identity (Kleiber, 1999). A leisure experience may provide the opportunity for a teenager to be an autonomous individual, for an accountant to be expressive and creative, or for a timid person to take on a leadership position. Through leisure, people may have the opportunity to play with roles, social dynamics, interests, and may even discover capacities or gifts of which they were not aware. The expansion of interests and roles through leisure is one way in which people may expand and complexify their self-understanding and self-definition. Furthermore, people increase their self-awareness of an authentic self through experimenting with activities and then discovering something that is personally meaningful and expressive. This increase in authentic self-awareness is a critical step in identity (re)formation (Kleiber, 1999).

Self-expression is a natural outcome of intrinsic motivation: For when an activity is pursued for the sake of the activity itself then the person is assumed to believe that the activity is in some way representative of his/her sense of self. Unfortunately for many people in their day to day lives, opportunities for self-expression are few. Leisure, however, offers a space for exploring one’s interests and discovering and expressing talents and abilities that are personally valued and meaningful. Self-expression is a
cornerstone of identity formation, for without expression of one’s true self, there is only a façade of a self (Kleiber, 1999).

If leisure offers a space for the discovery and enactment of an authentic self then there may be gap between peoples’ sense of self within leisure (e.g. a musician) and in their everyday lives (e.g. a father and janitor). It is important for people to integrate their various experiences of self for them to become a true part of their identity, called identity congruence (Kleiber, 1999). If this is achieved then these complexifying dimensions of self can be understood as “one’s characteristics...organized into a unitary self” (Kleiber, 1999, p. 96). This is of course an ideal outcome, however there are sometimes conflicts between these characteristics and the roles or values related to them, but it is necessary to bring them into alignment in order to achieve a stable sense of identity (Kleiber).

Leisure may be an ideal context for identity development. Leisure as a context of perceived freedom, allows people to feel free to explore, discover and integrate new and different dimensions of self which may become authentic characteristics of identity. The discovery and expression of self may be experienced as a personal transformation, an “ah-ha” moment. Such a moment is discussed by Waterman (1990, 1993) within the concept of personal expressiveness. Waterman highlights the importance for people to participate in experiences that are personally expressive and that reaffirm their sense that that “this is who I really am”.

With the foundational components of leisure outlined, it is now important to turn to the context or setting of leisure, which in the case of this research, was nature. As discussed above, there are many factors which contribute to a meaningful and
developmentally relevant leisure experience, and as such it is time to turn to another important dimension of leisure, the lived context.

*Nature – An Environment and Context*

When people think of nature, there are a wide variety of possibilities of what they imagine, the language they would use to describe it, and the degree of (dis)connection they feel towards that place or idea. The natural environment is an essential component of nature-based leisure and a complex place and “thing” to study. For this reason it is important to consider the factors that may impact on people’s experience of nature-based leisure in terms of their cultural and historical notions of what nature is and how we relate to “it”.

There seems to be a continuum of possibilities in terms of how people relate to nature from extreme discomfort and disgust on one end, to a feeling of oneness and awe at the other. Where people fall on that continuum is at least partly based on their comfort levels and abilities to be in any given environment (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Within the literature on outdoor recreation, we mainly hear of people’s aesthetic enjoyment of nature and joy in encountering wild spaces. However, it needs to be acknowledged that for some people, nature evokes fear, disgust and discomfort (Bixler & Floyd, 1997). Although not all people experience joy and comfort in wild spaces, what Kaplan and Kaplan found was that in general, people do have a desire for natural settings over industrialized ones. Of course there is great variation from person to person in what that desire for nature means exactly. Clearly then generalizations cannot be made about all people’s experiences with and relationships to the natural environment. What is common however to almost all people in Western society is that we live in cities of asphalt and
concrete buildings and as such, being removed from these structures, conveniences and associated ways of life during nature-based leisure may make for a significant shift in our lived experience.

Unique Context

Nature and especially a wilderness type of environment provide a unique context for people to engage in leisure. It is well documented that the setting, context or environment of leisure has a significant impact on outcomes and experiences (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Neulinger, 1981).

The wilderness or natural environment does not provide a contextually “clean slate” in terms of social roles and the expectations of self and other, but like the leisure context, it does seem to provide a break or disengagement from an individuals’ usual roles, responsibilities, and assumptions about self and other (Hogan, 1992). Time with nature may take the usual experience of disengagement one step further than other leisure experiences as the environment itself is in such stark contrast to the average person’s everyday life. The environment, social structure, self-expectations, mode of travel, means of survival, closeness to the natural world and pace of life are all quite different in the backcountry. Those aspects may have a significant impact on a person’s experience. A common thread amongst participant accounts of the nature context is that there is something beyond description, “...there was something ‘different’ about being out in nature...” (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999, p. 31).

An introductory note by Mike Clelland in the beginning pages of a technical book about backpacking (O’Bannon & Clelland, 2001) revealed this concept of the uniquely desirable context of nature and it’s tacitly known latent potential. Clelland wrote,
null
Why go into the wilderness? The natural world can be hard work, frustrating, and uncomfortable…but we go nonetheless. What pulls us there, to a place that we sometimes perceive as unwelcoming? For me, and maybe you too, there is a very real tugging at the soul, a deep-rooted desire to find something, to achieve something…a metaphysical fix of sort.

The oppressive influences of our modern society keep many of us from being our real selves. We continually react not to Mother Nature, but to Mother Culture, and we take on identities and personalities not our own. But when we step into the wilderness, we temporarily liberate ourselves from those influences. There is a very real value to time spent in the wilderness. Perhaps we can begin to discover a little more about our real selves. Maybe we’ll get some reassurance that there is something behind it all, and that it’s good…..In the backcountry, you are surrounded not by nothing, but by lots and lots of something, an amazing variety of inter-locking everything! (p. v)

The last point made by Clelland (O’Bannon & Clelland, 2001) reflects an increased awareness and appreciation of the natural world. This mirrors findings by McDonald and Schreyer (1991) who found that outdoor experiences seem to create a unique state of consciousness, marked by a heightened sensory acuity. The importance of this unique state of consciousness lies not just in the increased ability to tune into the environment but also to tune into one’s self. An increased awareness of self and
environment may naturally position a person for a meaning-making, pause-like experience. These heightened senses are also linked to concepts of flow and peak experiences, perhaps suggesting that there is an increased potential for those experiences in nature (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Thus, it seems that natural environments and experiences in nature may hold great potential for transformative experiences by way of a heightened awareness and reflective frame of mind.

**Positive Outcomes**

Experiences in nature are unique to the specific environment, group dynamic or solo experience, method of travel, expectations, programming, comfort level, weather and any number of other factors. However, one thing that can be counted on is the multi-faceted way in which the experience may impact upon an individual. An excerpt from Ibrahim and Cordes (2002), demonstrates this concept:

Simply embarking on a journey may somehow signal newfound freedom, a liberation of spirit, an openness, and a willingness to experience (Leshner, 2001: 27). Inspired and with insights deepened, one is more at peace. As one backpacker expressed it, “You walk, eat, sit, sleep. And when you’ve covered some miles, you realize you’ve learned as much about yourself as about the land you’ve crossed – and that what you’ve explored has been the geography of the soul. You may learn that Walt Whitman was right when he said, ‘Now I see the secret of making the best persons. It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth!’” (Temple, 1990: 42). (pp. 28-29)
For this study, it is the developmental outcomes of learning (deeply) about one's self in parallel with one's environment that are of the greatest interest, however physical and other psychological benefits will also be briefly discussed.

*Psychological and developmental.* There are a number of psychological, emotional and developmental benefits to leisure experiences in nature. Benefits of this kind may range from the deeply personal and conceptually transformative to social experiences of simple enjoyment and fun.

Experiences in nature may foster increased self-esteem and self-confidence and also challenge gendered notions of ability and strength (Caulkins, White, & Russell, 2006; McDermott, 2004; Whittington, 2006). These experiences may also help people to relax, learn to appreciate their surroundings, and to savour time for quiet reflection. Time in nature can be a time of adventure and confidence building or an experience of calm contemplation and stress reduction (Roper-Starch, 1999). Further, these experiences can be engagements of meaningful social interaction, for in removing people from their usual environments, opportunities for sharing, cooperation, and bonding are increased (Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). All of these benefits can be experienced by people of all ages and developmental stages. Children must not be forgotten in this realm of benefits, as opportunities for social and personal learning in this natural environment are equally valuable, although currently undervalued (Bixler & Floyd 1997; Gillespie & Kalinowski, 2006; Louv, 2005).

*Physical.* Most leisure that takes place in a natural setting or in the backcountry, involves some degree of physical engagement; this however, can vary from the high risk, high physical demand of alpine mountaineering to flat-water canoeing on a small lake.
Outdoor recreation literature mainly focuses on the more intensive physical experiences and less on the more moderate activities such as birding or landscape painting. Regardless, since most people live in cities, simply being in nature may require more physical activity than people would otherwise engage in. This increase in physical activity is well documented to bring about a wide-range of benefits.

Physical activities such as paddling, walking or climbing are all good ways to increase cardiovascular fitness and improve strength. However, what is often overlooked is that nature-based leisure can also offer opportunities for physical rest, stress reduction and lessened physical pressures (Brown, 1981). In addition, the natural environment itself is known to reduce blood pressure and muscle tension (Ulrich et al., 1991) and to promote recovery from illness (Bixler & Floyd, 1997).

For some, physical challenge in nature-based leisure lead to more than increases in physical capacity:

...many of the participants claimed to have experienced a reawakening to their physical capabilities and a renewed sense of their bodies. Several found that once they overcame the psychological uncertainties they had about their physical abilities, and simply engaged themselves more fully in the challenge at hand, many were left with a sense of deep accomplishment, which invariably bolstered their self-confidence and self-esteem. (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999, p. 33)

Thus, the physical benefits may also be intricately tied up in people’s holistic view and experience of self, resulting in an improvement in their whole being and not simply their physical bodies. Caulkins et al. (2006), studying troubled women, found that demanding
physical work contributed to increases in feelings of competence. Additionally, Whittington (2006), in her study of female adolescents, and McDermott (2004), in her study of adult women “canoe-trippers”, found that physical challenge and accompanying feelings of strength, competence and determination, resulted in reconsiderations of oppressive assumptions of femininity, allowing them to reclaim their physicality, “That trip, I came back and it had changed me.” Questioned as to how it changed her, Laura replied: “It exploded my perception of myself as weak. . . . It instilled a sense of confidence in my physical capabilities. It was the connection between the mind and the body.” (McDermott, p. 292)

Although most of these studies focus on women’s experiences of physicality, it is thought that men would also identify the physical challenges as being a significant part of the experience (McDermott).

Connection to nature. There is something special about a natural environment, something that attracts and mystifies, something that overwhelms senses, and expands possibility and creativity. Even though most Westerners feel disconnected from nature, it is still an environment many seek for solace and renewal or creative inspiration. “Nature is a philosophical, psychological, scientific, economic, aesthetic, and recreational resource, and the great outdoors, as a spiritual resource, works on the recreationist’s soul” (Ibrahim & Cordes, 2002, p. 30).

Aristotle suggested that the highest form of leisure experience was contemplation, (Ibrahim & Cordes, 2002; Kleiber, 1999) – a time to reflect on one’s life and self and the workings and connections of the world. Contemporary leisure researchers agree with this
idea. Jensen and Guthrie (2006) praised the opportunities for meditation and contemplation that leisure and nature provide and the resulting benefits,

It offers time for a vision of life separate from work and daily chores. In turn, spiritual involvement during leisure can lead to higher thought and feelings and to real joy....This often occurs in nature, when one’s involvement provides more than a physical form of recreation. It allows attainment of a spiritual level of oneness with the environment. (p. 41)

Duenkel and Pratt (2001) viewed spiritual experiences in nature as a space where individuals are often able to “listen to, interact with, and deeply feel the presence of other beings much more clearly than before” (p. 10).

In modern Western society, time for slowing down and contemplating one’s life and world is generally not a cultural value. The pace and values of this lifestyle demand that people keep moving and working, keep “doing” instead of pausing, and contemplating, as suggested by May (1981). Experiences in and with nature tend to offer time for quiet contemplation and space for experiencing a sense of connection to something greater than one’s self. The benefits of a nature-based experience can extend into a person’s everyday life, “...direct contact with nature inspired many participants to ... to ‘get in touch’, as one participant stated, with more important spiritual matters” (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999, p. 31).

Reflecting, contemplating and experiencing a sense of connection and awareness beyond the self are invaluable experiences. As Duenkel and Pratt (2001) described, “It is virtually impossible to fully know the Self until we know the Other: who and what share the planet with us” (p. 9). For if self-awareness is valued in our culture, then knowing
nature and experiencing a connection to nature (as Other) and all things beyond the self is a necessary experience. As such, whether one is "spiritual" or not, to have the experience of being in nature, is to have the opportunity to experience a sense of connection to all living things, which can expand one's conception of this world and of his/her self within it (Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) were impressed by the depth of spiritual impact that they found when reviewing wilderness research.

Clearly, leisure experiences in natural environments hold multi-dimensional possibilities for positive outcomes in terms of human development. The unique context and environment of nature appear to hold a little understood potential and inspiration for people, ushering them to look beyond their usual conceptions of self and reality, to pause, appreciate and reconsider. However, just as not all leisure is equal, not all experiences in nature are the same and much of the previous discussion is based on activities that are physically demanding and more of a flow type of experience. Pause inducing activities and less physically demanding experiences have been less of a focus of outdoor recreation research and literature and for that reason I have moved away from a discussion of outdoor recreation and adopted the more purposefully inclusive term of nature-based leisure.

*Nature-Based Leisure*

Just about anyone who has ever taken a walk in a forest, hiked a mountain path, floated down a river or read a book under a tree, will tell you that there is a special quality to time with nature, a quality which almost eludes description. Until recently, the value of nature - beyond economic terms - has not been given significant thought or recognition in North America (Suzuki & McConnell, 1997). The role of nature in terms
of human development and life experience has been given even less consideration. Over the last two decades however, there has been a significant growth in literature documenting the value of experiences in nature, in terms of healing, development, adventure and education (Burns, 2005; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Lloyd & Little, 2005; Louv, 2005; Williams & Harvey, 2001).

What It Is

I have adopted the term nature-based leisure in order to be more inclusive of the wide variety of ways of interacting with and participating nature-based activities. This term does not have a formal pre-conceived definition and so in the following paragraphs will discuss the nuances of my construction of nature-based leisure and how I intended for this terminology to be understood and applied.

Nature-based leisure is about bringing together the state of mind, and experience of leisure within the unique environment and context of nature. Nature-based leisure is about partaking in an endeavour for the equal purposes of interacting with the environment and context of nature, as well as participating in a desired activity or pastime. I have chosen to use the term nature-based leisure for the purpose of distinguishing it from outdoor recreation, which is often associated with specific experiences and activities such as canoeing or rock-climbing, leaving little room for alternative leisure experiences with nature.

Traditionally outdoor recreation research has centered on just that - recreation. The difference between a focus on recreation and on leisure is the lack of focus on the activity and concern with the state of mind of the participant (Ibrahim & Cordes, 2002). As stated by Kleiber (1999), leisure pursuits can range from intensive to relaxed,
connected to detached, or even from challenging to tranquil, and most importantly leisure is a context of relative freedom with the expectation of preferred experience. In practice however, outdoor recreation seems to have focused on a selection of specific activities and has somewhat neglected to embrace the full breadth of potential within the nature-based leisure context. There are a selection of activities and outcomes that are commonly associated with outdoor recreation and which tend to overshadow other activity and experience possibilities that can occur within this leisure context. For example, rock-climbing, wilderness backpacking, voyageur-inspired canoe trips and other such challenge, risk and adventure related activities are the dominant activities of study. Other leisure activities done within nature such as walking meditation, yoga, or painting are underrepresented within outdoor recreation literature and programming. Thus, by using the term nature-based leisure, I aim to purposefully open-up the realm of nature-based possibilities in order to be more inclusive of the range of possible experiences and activities.

Another reason for avoiding the term outdoor recreation is that it often invokes images of the dominant male model of tripping known as the heroic quest:

... The participant undergoes a real life experience in the wilderness that parallels the mythical quest of the hero. The student hears a call to adventure, leaves home, encounters dragons on the way and slays them, reflects on his conquest, and returns home as a hero with a clearer understanding of himself. (Warren, 1985, p. 14)

There are complex gender issues at play with concepts such as the heroic quest, and although models such as that serve a certain purpose, this research seeks to be more
inclusive and all-encompassing in what are deemed valid and worthy experiences with nature. Many researchers in the area of nature-based leisure pursuits have identified this as an issue (e.g., Henderson et al., 1999; Humberstone, 1998; Warren, 1996) and Hogan (1992) said that it is less developmentally engaging to approach nature as an opponent. Again, outdoor recreation is currently steeped in these sorts of practices and for this reason I aim to move away from that approach by using the term nature-based leisure. In using this term, I, like McDermott (2004) believe in and seek to honour nature as a great teacher and developmentally inspiring place without the addition of challenges and stressors (Henderson, 2001).

Finally, nature-based leisure terminology, with it’s openness to the full gamut of activities, acknowledges the spectrum of experiences of engagement from a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), to a pause state (May, 1981), and their respective benefits. Flow within nature-based pursuits is more often associated with physical endeavours and the participant’s preoccupation with what is immediately at hand. As demonstrated by the women’s experience of physicality and how that shifted their sense of self, a physically-related experience of flow can also be challenging to a person’s views and thus developmentally engaging (McDermott, 2004). A pause state, on the other hand, where a person is not preoccupied but instead is able to muse, be open, and reflect, may by its nature be developmentally productive in the movement toward self-actualization. For an experience of pause is an experience of being mindfully present while also becoming more acutely aware. Both pause and flow states are possible within the reaches of nature-based leisure and are both important lived experiences as they each hold different but valuable developmental potential for different individuals. Nature-
Based leisure is a unique context and environment which seems to foster unique experiences of development across a diversity of activities and modes of engagement, and by embracing that diversity, this study seeks to better understand the intersection of this diversity with nature-based leisure.

The purpose of this research endeavour was to discover the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. Although much is known about each dimension independently (nature, leisure and personal transformation), the intricacies of the intersection have yet to be fully understood. Thus, the culmination of this heuristic project is a rich and detailed account of this otherwise tacit phenomenon – the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. By describing the essence of nature-based leisure and personal transformation this research contributes not only to further understanding of the independent elements but also this unique intersection.
CHAPTER 3

As previously outlined in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the lived experience of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. This study focused on the experiences of individuals who self-reported to have been personally transformed, or changed in some meaningful way, and who attributed this transformation to a nature-based leisure experience. By interviewing those who have experienced this phenomenon, this research sought to elicit the nuances of this phenomenon. I was not simply seeking to understand the lived experience of personal transformation, but to bring together the thoughts, perceptions, reflections and experiences of feeling transformed in conjunction with a place called nature and a mind-space called leisure. I was seeking to gather narratives of experiences of how nature-based leisure has served as a context for personal transformation in order to “call out” the details of that lived dynamic. Put simply, this research was about the lived and experienced intersection of leisure, nature, and personal transformation.

This research was undertaken as a qualitative heuristic study because I, the primary co-researcher had personal experience with the phenomenon of being personally transformed or changed in some meaningful way as a result of a nature-based experience. Thus, I also had an interest in talking with others in order to illuminate the essence of experiencing personal transformation within nature-based leisure. In general, the approach for a heuristic study is to ask: “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (Patton, 2002, p. 107). As such, heuristics was an appropriate methodology for this study because it values the tacit knowledge of the researcher – placing myself within the study
– while also bringing together others who have also experienced this phenomenon in order to elucidate the experience beyond individual tacit knowledge. The following discussion will outline the methodological details of this study.

A Qualitative Approach

When people think of research, they often think of number-crunching and fitting experiences or findings into categories. This type of thinking about research falls into a positivistic quantitative framework – a traditional scientific approach to research which often seeks to quantify why something happens (Patton, 2002). In this positivistic type of research, the primary co-researcher ideally takes an objective position, situating herself or himself and his/her experiences, influences, biases and understandings outside of the research (Patton). This project however, did not fit within this positivist, objective, quantified approach. This project was about understanding how I, the primary co-researcher, and the participants or co-researchers\(^3\) feel about, describe, and understand our lived experiences of this phenomenon. I was seeking to gather rich, in-depth, thick descriptions to give the reader a comprehensive picture of the situation from which the findings have come. By providing such description, the reader will be able to decide for themselves, as to whether the findings are applicable to their own specific situation (Creswell, 1998; Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002). This kind of description also serves to illuminate and honour individuals’ experiences and perspectives as stand-alone findings. As such, this research project falls within the reaches of qualitative research.

\(^3\)“Co-Researcher” is simply the heuristic name given to a participant. This name is meant to demonstrate the value placed on the individual’s tacit knowledge.
Qualitative research seeks to understand how people describe and experience their world by gathering rich, detailed accounts from within natural settings (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). In the words of Denzin and Lincoln (1994),

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2).

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research is usually undertaken because of eight points: there is a “how” or “what” to be answered; exploration and theory development is needed; a detailed understanding is sought; it takes place within a natural setting; there is a desire to communicate findings in a literary or narrative style; there is time and necessity for extensive and involved data collection; the researcher is comfortable with an active role, and being an active learner; and finally because the audience, whether by way of journals or supervisors, are open to this type of research.

Additionally, Moustakas (1990) outlined characteristics of heuristic research which overlap with and complement Creswell’s qualitative characteristics. Heuristic research is first and foremost, concerned with the quality and essence of an experience, not causal relationships. It asks for the researcher to become personally involved and to actively participate in the discovery process and to share those findings through thick description and creative synthesis (Moustakas).

This study of nature-based leisure and personal transformation fell well within the characteristics of qualitative research. This research used a naturalistic approach to
gather rich descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon. Furthermore, due to the nature of the topic, it involved intensive data collection and an ongoing process of discovery of my own understanding of the phenomenon. Lastly, within the academic arenas of leisure and outdoor recreation, there is an acceptance and valuing of the knowledge gained from qualitative research as well as an acknowledged place for descriptive narrative writing (Dupuis, 1999).

Qualitative research has commonly been used within outdoor recreation and leisure literature (Dupuis, 1999; Henderson, 1991; Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005; Humberstone, Brown, & Richards, 2003; Samdahl, 1999). Qualitative methods have helped leisure and outdoor recreation researchers and practitioners gain awareness as to how people have experienced various activities and settings (Haluza-Delay, 2001; McDermott, 2004; Stokowski, 2002), derive meaning and development from activities (Luckner & Nadler, 1995; Sibthorp, 2003), and ultimately gained a richer understanding of the value of leisure and outdoor recreation (Lloyd & Little, 2005).

**Heuristics**

The foundation of heuristics lies in tacit knowing (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002; Sela-Smith, 2002). Tacit knowledge is that which is understood without being openly expressed – it is implied understanding. Polanyi in his 1966 book *The Tacit Dimension*, discussed at length the idea that we can know more than we can tell. Sela-Smith (2002) most eloquently described tacit knowledge in the following way:

The tacit dimension of personal knowledge is that internal place where experience, feeling, and meaning join together to form both a picture of the world and a way to navigate that world. Tacit knowledge is a continually
Nature and Personal Transformation

Growing, multileveled, deep-structural organization that exists for the most part outside of ordinary awareness and is the foundation on which all other knowledge stands. This deep dimension of knowledge is under construction each time a new experience is introduced. The individual constantly compares the outer world with the inner knowledge base to evaluate and to determine what it is that is being experienced. (p. 60)

It is this very tacit knowing that heuristics seeks to illuminate by allowing “…one to sense the unity or wholeness of something from an understanding of the individual qualities or parts” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 21).

Personal transformation and experiences in and with nature are of the tacit-genre of knowledge. One might understand and relate to a sense of change, or find intelligible an expression of “being renewed”. However, the details of experiencing transformation and what it is to experience that through or with nature, is a holistically engaging encounter which is not easily communicated. In seeking to describe this dynamic holistic knowledge, the heuristic method is deliberate in revealing this tacit knowledge, to call out emotion, feeling and meaning.

The heuristic method comes out of the phenomenological tradition and has many similarities to phenomenology, but there are also important distinctions. The foundational interests of both heuristics and phenomenology are in the lived experience of a given phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1997). In the words of van Manen,

Anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically
[Document content]
measurable or subjectively felt...Consciousness is always transitive. To be conscious is to be aware, in some sense, of some aspect of the world. And thus phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being. (p. 9)

In this way, heuristics borrows its foundations from phenomenology, a dedication to the understanding of how humans consciously experience their world. Furthermore, heuristics utilizes the phenomenological focus and terminology of *phenomenon*: “for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is – and without which it could not be what it is” (Husserl, 1982; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, cited in van Manen, 1997, p. 10). This way of knowing and understanding through exploration of a phenomenon is a valued tool and perspective in leisure research (Dupuis, 1999; Watkins, 2000). These foundational similarities are important to note, however the heuristic method breaks from phenomenology in the approach to studying a phenomenon.

Moustakas (1994) provided a clear distillation of the combined similarities and differences of heuristics and phenomenology in the following excerpt from his book *Phenomenological Research Methods*. This excerpt details the differences of study design, researcher and participation positioning and data analysis:

1. Whereas the [phenomenological] studies focus on a situation in which the experience investigated occurs, heuristic research is a wide open investigation in which typically the research participant widely and deeply explores the phenomenon. Rarely is only one example or situation used to depict the research participants’ experience.
2. Whereas in [phenomenological] studies the research seeks descriptions of experience, in heuristics the research, in addition to narrative descriptions, seeks to obtain self-dialogues, stories, poems, artwork, journals and diaries and other personal documents that depict the experience.

3. Whereas the [phenomenological] studies seek to construct structures of the experience, heuristic research aims toward composite depictions that remain close to the individual stories rather than elucidating situational structural dynamics. Heuristic investigations culminate in a creative synthesis. [Phenomenological] studies end with a general structural description.

4. Whereas in [phenomenological] studies, the individual co-researchers disappear in the process of interpretation and structural analysis, in heuristics the research participants remain visible in the examination of the data and especially in the individual portraits they continue to be portrayed as whole persons. (p. 18-19)

An additional distinguishing factor is the situatedness of the researcher. Heuristics begins with a phenomenon that the primary co-researcher (researcher) has experienced and is passionate about understanding, whereas in phenomenology, this is not a necessity. As outlined by Patton (2002), the central research questions of these two approaches demonstrate this difference. For heuristics the question is: “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely?” (p. 107). For phenomenology the question is
"What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people" (p. 107).

This explicitly personal starting point for inquiry is not a commonly employed approach to research. Moustakas (1990) however, argued that, “with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social – and perhaps universal – significance” (p. 15). For this research I was searching for the essence of personal transformation within nature-based encounters for two reasons. First, I recognized the limitations of searching to understand my own experiences in isolation, and second, this lived experience had yet to be made intelligible within an academic context. I believed that both my own and others’ personal experiences of this phenomenon would have a valuable place within the academic literature as contributing to the larger understanding of human experiences. As eloquently stated by Moustakas (1990),

The power of heuristics is in its recognition of the significance of self-searching and the value of personal knowledge as essential requirements for the understanding of common human experiences. There is no substitute for direct, comprehensive, accurate first-person accounts of experience, for the importance of self-inquiry and self-dialogue in discovering the nature and meaning of one’s own experience and that of others. (p. 90)

The search for understanding is not simply a search for self-understanding, but a search to illuminate the essence of an experience for many. The findings of this research were not expected to be generalizeable, but instead provide a thick description of the phenomenon, as experienced by the co-researchers. The value of this kind of in-depth,
detailed description lies in gaining a more thorough understanding of the value and potential of experiences in nature and how those experiences have proven to be especially moving and meaningful for the co-researchers of this study. Programmers and practitioners in environmental education, outdoor recreation and education, adventure education, and therapeutic recreation may benefit from this knowledge, as it will give them additional insight into the (potential) experience of future participants, and perhaps ways in which meaning-making and growth can be inspired.

The Research Project

The objective of this research was to bring together a rich description of the essence of the intersection of nature-based leisure and personal transformation. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are many ways of defining and discussing nature, leisure, and transformation. These varying perspectives were not of great concern at the outset of this study, as it was the experiences, feelings, perceptions and tacit knowing of the co-researchers which ultimately informed the defining qualities of this phenomenon.

Research Questions

The formation of the central research question was guided by heuristic methods, focusing on the co-researchers’ descriptions and understanding of their experience of the phenomenon. The sub-questions were constructed with the intention of assisting in focusing the direction of the research objective.

Central Research Question:
What is the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure?

Sub-Questions:
1. How do people describe the experience of personal transformation?
2. How do people describe the significance of nature in personal transformation?
3. How do people describe the immediate and day-to-day impact of their transformation?

*Design Strategies – Naturalistic, Empathetic, Constructivist, Reflexive*

*Naturalistic inquiry.* Due to the nature of the phenomenon and the methods, I employed *naturalistic inquiry*, for I was not “testing” but simply paying witness to the outcome of co-researchers’ descriptions of the phenomenon. I exercised, *being with* (Moustakas, 1995), a practice of being present as my own person in relation to the other co-researchers, bringing my own knowledge, perspective and experiences into the relationship while also listening paying witness to co-researchers’ feelings, thoughts, perspectives and experiences. To *be with* was employed both in relation to the interviews and the resulting texts. As stated by Creswell (1998), “the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). My goals were to obtain details of meaning, perspective, and feeling by simply asking questions, sharing, and allowing the co-researchers to guide me through their experiences without any influence of device or manipulation on my part.

*Empathic neutrality.* In order to effectively and ethically engage a co-researcher in a dialogue about a personal phenomenon that we have both experienced, I carefully attended to the position of *empathetic neutrality*. As described by Patton (2002), empathic neutrality is “a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgement, and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding” (2002, p. 50). Moustakas (1990) also discussed the need for an empathic approach; he emphasized “being open to oneself and to the co-researcher” (p. 48).
The text on the page is indiscernible due to the black-out effect.
I was very cognizant of my reactions to co-researchers’ stories and experiences and tried to be equal in showing interest in their experiences and perspectives that were either similar or different from my own. I often found myself using more, and probing questions to understand experiences that were different from mine, showing genuine interest and enthusiasm in co-researchers’ unique experiences. When we had a shared experience I usually offered a story of my own experience in order to demonstrate understanding and interest; this usually inspired further sharing. Sometimes however, I would offer a story of my own even if it was different from another co-researcher’s experience. I did this because I found that asking clarifying question after clarifying question sometimes undermined co-researchers’ willingness to share. By offering my own, although differing perspective and story, I gave co-researcher’s the opportunity to question/reject my perspective and to further clarify their position, experience and understanding without my probing or prompting. I had to be constantly aware of the flow of conversation and question my desire to question or share and consider (in-the-moment) whether my action would encourage further sharing, distract from the topic, undermine the co-researcher. It was necessary for me to be continually aware of the reasoning and purpose of the ways in which I communicated with co-researchers in order to be true to my intention of providing an open and comfortable flow of communication.

One situation that arose with all co-researchers was for them to ask “Is that what you wanted to hear?” I was empowered by the nature of this qualitative heuristic research to reply by saying: “It is not about what I ‘want’ to hear, this research is about your personal truth and beliefs”. I would go on to say that in the heuristic method co-researchers’ life stories and beliefs would remain relatively whole and would be
null
presented as part of the final document. Having this conversation tended to bolster trust and inspired further sharing. Informing co-researchers that their full story was to be part of the final document encouraged them to present the full truth of their experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, all co-researchers (myself included) stated that this was the first time they had the opportunity to fully share their thoughts and reflections on our transformative experiences with nature. Thus a mutual trust and gratitude developed in terms of appreciating both the opportunity to share as well as pay witness to another person who shared in such a unique life experience. My own appreciation for the complete picture of each co-researcher’s story actually became a challenge as I found myself very reluctant to compartmentalize and break apart individual accounts.

*Constructionist paradigm.* Constructionism takes the ontological perspective that all people create meaning in their lives on a continual basis (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 2002; Rossman; 1998). As such, heuristic research is naturally housed under a constructionist umbrella. As Moustakas (1990) says,

> Behaviour is governed and experience is determined by the unique perceptions, feelings, intuitions, beliefs, and judgements housed in the internal frame of reference of a person. Meanings are inherent in a particular world view, an individual life, and the connections between, self, other, and world. (p. 32)

This research project assumed that all people come to their experiences from different understandings of the phenomenon. I assumed that the variations (or similarities) in social, political, and economic positioning and in experiences of power and oppression would influence and inform all peoples’ expressions of the same phenomenon.
The basic premise of social constructionism is that there exists a cyclical social and self-production, reproduction, and internalization of socially constructed norms, expectations, roles and thus, of society. A clear outline of this is given by Berger and Luckmann (2002), who state that there are “three dialectical moments in social reality. Each of them corresponds to an essential characterization of the social world: Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man [sic] is a social product” (p. 46).

Social constructionism views the world and social order as dynamic, malleable, relational, and reactive. As such, co-researchers’ experiences may be steeped in their sub-conscious perception and experience of roles, ethnicity, socio-economic class and the like. However, simply because meaning and understanding is constructed on an ongoing basis and may have subjective components does not negate its value, in fact these variations and influences may provide the most interesting points of discussion.

The final product of heuristic research is a creative synthesis, rich with variations and perspectives of a central tacit phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). To me, this is the heart of heuristic research, to have a dialogue in order to understand not what all people experience, or how all people construct meaning but to deeply understand the essence of a lived experience for some. By conducting in-depth, repeat interviews with co-researchers, I sought to gain a multifaceted and detailed appreciation of each person’s perspective. As suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1998), “The variable and personal (intramental) nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents” (p. 207). Through the process of in-depth interviewing, I had hoped that social constructions would reveal themselves, at least to some extent and with that to
view the essence of the phenomenon as a collection of personally situated constructions of experience and consciousness.

Because the co-researchers and I engaged in dialogue about a personal experience, it was necessary for me to remain open to and mindful of the countless number of ways of perceiving and experiencing the same phenomenon. As such, it was important to address my own experience, assumptions and constructions.

**Reflexivity.** Reflexivity was both an integral part of this research and was also a factor contributing to the verification, trustworthiness and authenticity of this study. My voice was intended to be transparent in this heuristic research process; I was to be explicit in my perspective, to approach my own understandings as no more and no less valuable or true than the perspectives and descriptions of the individual co-researchers. I was conscious of giving my own thoughts and feelings equal reflective attention in order to achieve “balance – understanding and depicting the world authentically in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness” (Patton, 2002, p. 41). These are the goals of all qualitative researchers, but it is something that had to be explicitly and intentionally attended to because I was integrated in this heuristic research.

Throughout the interviews I was mindful of how and when I shared my own experiences, as to not influence or lead, but instead to simply offer my own perspectives and reflections when it seemed appropriate to do so. I was conscious of when my own experiences and perspectives were similar or different from the person whom I was interviewing and to simply witness that similarity or difference without judgement or assumption. When emotion or resistance arose I recognized that there was perhaps
something that I did not understand and needed further clarification. I had to be continually aware of the possible ways in which my wording of probing questions or the sharing of my own experiences could impact a co-researcher. I would constantly be asking myself questions about what more I needed or wanted to know about a co-researcher's experience and how I could ask that question in an open and empowering way. I took time to form probing questions, pausing before I spoke or stopping myself if I felt I was wording a question in a way that would lead or influence the answer.

Journaling was a helpful part of this reflective process and I found myself equally enthusiastic to reflect upon both the similarities and differences between co-researchers and myself, and the consequent thoughts and emotions that arose within myself. I journaled after each interview, noting areas where I needed further clarification, similarities that were emerging across all co-researchers, and unique perspectives held by individuals. This exercise allowed me to better understand my own experiences and perspectives by being in a constant state of awareness of the unique yet shared experiences of all of us.

Methods of Data Collection

Co-researchers – The Criteria

This research required two principle attributes of co-researchers. First, they must have been personally and strongly familiar with the phenomenon and have experienced it more than a year ago but less than ten years ago. Second, they must have been willing to openly and honestly share the details of their knowledge, tacit and otherwise. Furthermore, I determined that if more than six people were interested in participating, then I would employ a process of narrowing the sample based on convenience and
suitability. In terms of convenience, I did not have the resources to travel great distances to conduct interviews. As such, ideal co-researchers would have resided near St. Catharines or the Greater Toronto Area. For those who could not be included in the study, I offered them two things, the interview questions and an invitation to send me a detailed narrative account of their transformative story. Additionally I offered to provide them with a follow-up on the outcome of this study.

*Solicitation of Co-Researchers*

Purposeful, and snowball sampling was used to locate and gain access to potential co-researchers through collaboration with the owners of a nature-based retreat centre in Ontario. I created an email (Appendix A) which the retreat centre sent to clientele who had participated in one of their programs at least one or more years ago. This email included a brief description of the research project, the phenomenon of interest, and the expectations of co-researchers in terms of time and availability. If an individual was interested, he/she responded directly to the primary co-researcher via an email address created specifically for this project. One co-researcher heard of this study by simple word-of-mouth through the university community and requested information on participation. My first communication with this individual was exactly the same as all other co-researchers: the basic solicitation email, through the research-specific email address.

In responding to myself, the primary co-researcher, potential co-researchers were replied to using a second pre-constructed email (Appendix B) with two files attached, the consent form (Appendix D), and the basic demographic information sheet (Appendix C). If a person was interested in participating, he/she was to complete and return those two
forms via fax, mail or email. The basic demographic information sheet gathered information regarding age, gender, educational status, description of their involvement in nature-based leisure, and a description of their transformative experience(s). Gathering this demographic information allowed me to make informed decisions as to who fit the co-researcher sampling criteria.

Using this email solicitation method, 13 individuals responded expressing interest in learning more about participation. Two people were not suitable for this study because they resided out of the province, and another two did not reply to the follow-up email with the consent form and basic demographic information sheet. I could not coordinate a meeting with another person due to conflicting availability and four others were well-known to me through participation at the retreat centre and so were not chosen for interviewing due to concerns of bias. All those who were not suitable for the study were offered the option of completing a self-interview. Only one person who was not suitable to participate completed this self-interview, but their accounts were not included in this thesis. In the end three people from the retreat-centre and one other person joined me as co-researchers on this journey to explore and understand the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure.

Because this research was seeking to elucidate depth and not breadth of individuals’ experiences, intensive interviewing was employed (averaging five hours per co-researcher), it was reasonable to have a small participant group of five people (including myself) and acquire a sufficient data set. Moustakas (1990) suggests that one person can be sufficient and that ten to fifteen participants would be a maximum for this type of research. With four co-researchers (plus myself) I was able to achieve adequate
variability in experience and perspective, and a collection of rich, in-depth descriptions. Such small sample sizes are common in qualitative research, as it is the depth, not breadth of information which is sought (Patton, 2002). Descriptive biographies of each of the co-researchers (Adele, Maya, Quinn, Naomi and I) are included in Chapter 4.

*Interviews and Artefacts*

Within heuristic research, extended interviews are the most common method of data collection. Interviews may also be supplemented by an artefact such as a journal, poetry, or artwork or any way in which the co-researchers had expressed their experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990; van Manen, 1997). This research employed a set of two interviews per co-researcher, with the second interview including the involvement of an artefact.

This research was of a particularly personal phenomenon and as such it required the development of a trusting, comfortable relationship, allowing the co-researchers to feel at ease, and to share in-depth descriptions of their experience with the phenomenon. In order to facilitate both comfort and full disclosure within an environment of trust and natural conversation, the interviews combined semi-structured and informal conversational style (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002).

These interviews followed a general interview guide (Appendix E) with open-ended questions, while also allowing for conversational dialogue outside of the prescribed guide. A conversational style of interviewing is preferred in heuristic research, as it most naturally facilitates a shared “exploration and search for meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47).
Dialogue is the preferred approach in that it aims toward encouraging expression, elucidation, and disclosure of the experience being investigated. Jourard (1969) has shown that self-disclosure elicits disclosure; there may be moments in the interview process when the primary investigator shares an experience that will inspire and evoke richer, fuller, more comprehensive depictions from the co-researcher.

(Moustakas, p. 47)

However, by also giving some structure to the interviews, via a guide, I was assured of staying “on track,” with the phenomenon remaining the focus of dialogue. The predetermined questions ensured that each co-researcher was given the opportunity to respond to key areas of research interest, thus giving a degree of continuity between participants. As anticipated, there was a significant amount of spontaneous generation of questions and the dialogue consequently unfolded in often unexpected ways. This mixed approach to interviewing is common within qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Heuristic interviews are not meant to be ruled by the clock, but by what Moustakas (1990) calls experiential time, allowing only the co-researcher’s full voluntary disclosure to determine the end point of the interview. Because the interviews had both structured and unstructured elements, there was not a strict timeline to follow. However, the assumption that two hours would be a reasonable timeframe was quite accurate in practice - both the first and second interviews averaged over 2 hours each.

Each co-researcher was interviewed twice to allow for a deeper investigation of the phenomenon. By engaging in two interviews, co-researchers had more time to
explore the specifics of the two themes of the phenomenon (personal transformation and nature) with greater focus and less stress. The first interview focused on the experience of personal transformation and the second interview focused on the context and experience of nature with the additional aide of an artefact provided by the co-researcher. This splitting of the data collection allowed time for reflection, transcription, and period of incubation for myself, thus enhancing my immersion in the data.

An additional consideration in employing heuristic methodology is the primary co-researcher’s own participation, sharing, flexibility, and openness. As the primary co-researcher, my own experiences were valued and integrated into the data, and because of this I needed to be as open as possible to the variety of opinions, experiences, and perspectives expressed by co-researchers as well as being willing to share my own perspectives when appropriate. In the words of Moustakas (1990),

> In heuristic interviewing, the data generated is dependent upon accurate, empathic listening; being open to oneself and to the co-researcher; being flexible and free to vary procedures to respond to what is required in the flow of dialogue; and being skilful in creating a climate that encourages the co-researcher to respond comfortably, accurately, comprehensively, and honestly in elucidating the phenomena. (p. 48)

Moustakas outlines seven types of questions that can be helpful in eliciting the essence of a phenomenon (see Appendix F). These questions were embedded in my interview guide (Appendix E), along with probing questions specific to personal transformation and nature.
The first interview – personal transformation. The purpose of the first interview was to capture the essence of personal transformation, to gain a full and detailed image of what it means and feels like to be transformed. It was important to dedicate a full interview to this aspect of the phenomenon because personal transformation itself is a concept which is not bounded by a single definition, description or understanding. In Chapter 2, I discussed the complications of studying personal transformation due to the many perspectives, academic disciplines, and even spiritual explanations and descriptions. As such, the goal of this first interview was to achieve a rich and in depth description of how each co-researcher experienced, felt about, was bodily, cognitively, and/or spiritually aware of having experienced personal transformation. Furthermore, it was more than the initial feeling of transformation which was sought, but the way in which that shift or change had impacted his/her day-to-day life or conscious awareness of somehow being different.

In preparation for the second interview, co-researchers were asked to reflect on something which best represented or symbolized an experience they had with this phenomenon. All participants were enthusiastic about this dimension of the interview process and had chosen their artefacts well in advance. They were asked to bring this artefact to the next interview and were reminded that the artefact would be photographed for the purpose of this study – this photographic release was embedded within the participation consent form (Appendix D).

The second interview – nature. The second interview was focused on the experience of nature and how and why nature was (or was not) central to the co-researchers’ experience of transformation. This interview specifically explored the
intersection of context and transformation as well as the co-researchers’ relationship with nature and how that had impacted or intersected with his/her experience of transformation.

This second interview also focused on the artefact. Co-researchers were asked to speak about the artefact and how it captured the essence of their experience. The artefact was meant to represent the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature. It was thought that the artefact may help the co-researcher to reveal greater emotion, and more personal expression by speaking directly to what it represented to him/her, and in practice this was the case. The artefact seemed to help co-researchers to hone in on the feelings and perspective that the intersection meant to them. The use of artefacts did in fact help the primary co-researcher to better understand the holistic experience of the co-researcher because “artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations” (van Manen, 1997, p. 74).

Artefacts can and did take on a wide variety of creative forms, from poetry to felted capes, journal entries to drums and photographs (Moustakas, 1990; van Manen 1997). These artefacts are one of the unique features of heuristic research, in that they are seen as an integral component of the conscious meaning making of the phenomenon, and as such were necessary for gaining a holistic understanding (Moustakas). Phenomenology sometimes employs the use of an artefact, but it is not as common, nor as central (van Manen).
Data Analysis

As with the style of interviewing, there is a heuristic way of engaging in data analysis. The basis of heuristic inquiry is both inductive and creative. This process embraces the discovery of answers and outcomes and honours the individual components over generalizations. Patton (2002) describes this in general qualitative terms as:

Immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; begins by exploring, then confirming; guided by analytical principles rather than rules; ends with creative synthesis. (p. 41)

More specifically however, Moustakas (1990) developed a detailed methodology for heuristic research. The six phases are: initial engagement; immersion into the topic and question; incubation; illumination; explication; and creative synthesis as the culmination of research (Moustakas).

Initial Engagement

This first phase is one of searching for a topic and question: “to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher” (Moustakas, 1990, p.27). Heuristics expects the primary co-researcher to turn inwards, considering his/her own experiences in order to find a topic that is both personally meaningful and fascinating enough to sustain involved research (Moustakas). I have documented my progression through this research experience, my interests and questions, and how they evolved over a year and a half through personal journals, papers and drafts of the project proposal.
Immersion

The second phase, *immersion*, begins once the question has been decided and the terms within that question have been defined. During this phase, the question is to stay within consciousness of the researcher at all times: "waking, sleeping, and even dream states" (Moustakas, 1990, p.28). The researcher is to become aware of "all possibilities for meaning" (p.28). All options, perspectives and ways of knowing are explored. I experienced this phase as the final clarification of my thesis project through ongoing searching and engagement with all things that stimulated thought on this phenomenon. However, this phase is also in reference to the initial meaning-making with the raw data.

Only one co-researcher (and their data) was engaged with at any given time. The general schedule was to conduct an interview with a certain co-researcher, immediately transcribe the interview within 24 hours, then conduct the second interview with the same person and again transcribe that interview within 24 hours. In consequence, I was intensively immersed in the perspectives and experiences of only one co-researcher at a time. In between interviews I also reflected on notes taken during the interview, clarifying questions were noted, and the major themes or factors of importance to the co-researcher were noted. During this process, I was also in a state of ongoing self-analysis, reflecting on my reactions to and identifications with co-researcher accounts of the phenomenon. Notes on emerging themes, differences, and similarities were updated and reflected upon on a regular basis, allowing for a progressive familiarity of both individual accounts and the larger picture of the unfolding phenomenon. This was a period of intense involvement with the data in every sense, a complete immersion, as I was physically situated alone in a house without phone, internet, or television on the outskirts of Huntsville, Ontario, throughout the majority of the data collection process.
Incubation

The third phase, incubation is a time of detachment. This moving away from intense involvement is meant to allow for the internalization of the information by creating space for subconscious processing of meaning and data. Moustakas (1990) described this phase as a seed having been planted and now invisible forces begin their work to help it grow and develop.

Once the data was collected and transcribed, I left for two weeks of canoeing in Algonquin Park. During this break from the data, I was able to let go of the independent voices of co-researchers and allow all perspectives and experiences to manifest in my mind in different groupings and combinations. Additionally, because this “break” included co-leading trips, I was able to pay witness to real time transformations and experiences of self discovery within nature. This witnessing of the phenomenon firsthand provided me with inspiration and also a sense of ease to truly “let go” of the data and just be. Throughout this time I journaled when I had a new thought or insight but mainly found myself reflecting on my own experiences, for witnessing others’ transformations brought me back to how this whole journey began.

Illumination

In the fourth phase, illumination I was to return to conscious contemplation of the data. This was a time “when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition” (Moustakas, 1990, p.29) and begins to recognize prominent themes. This process involved both the accumulation of new knowledge and perspectives along with discarding inaccurate conceptions (Moustakas).

Illumination marked an intensive return to the data with the aim of discovering prominent themes. I first went through the co-researchers’ transcripts (one co-researcher
at a time) and from that constructed a complete representation of them as individuals, their lived context and their perspectives on nature, personal transformation and the intersection of the two. I followed the interview guide (Appendix E) which progressed as follows: the first interview focused on defining and describing personal transformation, how co-researchers experienced it, the contexts associated with it, and what their transformative outcomes have been; the second interview focused on defining and describing nature, how they experienced it, how and why it was or was not important to their transformation, and finally their perspectives on the intersection itself, including a discussion of their artefact. By following the thematic goals of the interview guide I was able to identify the major feelings, ideas and experiences of each co-researcher by continually asking myself questions such as “How does co-researcher ‘x’ talk about/feel about/experience/describe/explain ‘y’” (“y” being based on the interview guide themes). Using this method, the complete perspectives and experiences for each individual were gathered. This first complete representation of each co-researcher averaged between 30 to 40 pages of grouped quotes. These complete representations of co-researchers’ own voices served as the foundation for my understanding of the experiences of each individual and how to appropriately represent each person’s experiences in more succinct sections.

Once I had a complete set of organized individual co-researchers’ thoughts, I began the process of weaving together complete stories for each person with my voice as the narrator of their perspectives. This was necessary to get at the tacit knowledge. Some co-researcher ideas such as talking about nature in terms of energy may have initially
The text on the page is not clearly visible due to the image quality. It appears to be a page from a book or a document, possibly containing paragraphs of text. The content is not legible enough to transcribe accurately.
seemed irrelevant in the big picture but by honouring their voices and perspectives and weaving it into their story, the tacit relevance was able to emerge later on.

For my own self-study practice, I re-read my own journals, at least 100 pages of emails I had sent home from various adventures, and looked through pictures. One challenge was that emails were often stripped of all negativity, as travelers often do, thus limiting my ability to step directly back into the way I perceived those experiences, being more limited to journals and pictures which evoked bodily memories and emotional responses. I was aware of the possibility of my own romantization of those experiences and so returned to journals from before or after the experiences. From these varied sources I constructed an outline of the major themes of my own experiences, the most prominent experiences, and outcomes. I sat with the interview guide themes and talked myself through them but found that to be a somewhat artificial experience. In the end the representation of my own story would turn out to be the most challenging to construct, as I was especially aware of how I perceived experiences now versus the perspectives I held during or before the transformative experiences. This was a humbling and difficult process of facing my own growth and maturity without judgement, and essentially being forced to accept a disparate view of my self, a “before” and “after” in being and perspective. I stepped away from my own data once again allowing the disparity to incubate and a way to express myself emerge. My primary concern with the handling of my own data was overindulging in the details of my experiences more than I had with the other co-researchers as a sub-conscious means of “explaining away” (to myself) the things about myself that were painful or otherwise difficult to face.
At this time, I also began to consider how various bodies of literature would or could inform the emerging themes. As is consistent with the heuristic method, this process of comparison and consideration of various bodies of literature continued right through the identification of the essence.

Explication

The fifth phase explication moved from recognition of the themes to meaning-making, gaining understanding and formulating explanations. “The researcher explicates the major components of the phenomenon, in detail, and is now ready to put them together into a whole experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). During this phase of research, the many ways of knowing and bodies of literature that were explored during the illumination phase were narrowed. Thematic descriptions were to be bounded as a collection of characteristics, organized within the attributes of personal transformation, nature and leisure.

During this phase I began to break the individual co-researcher’s complete descriptive representations into smaller, more manageable sections. The first section composed was the basic biography of each individual (Chapter 4). These biographies include all pertinent background information, including basic demographic information and any other information provided by the co-researcher that clarified his/her life experience as it pertained to his/her encounter with personal transformation and nature-based leisure. Some examples of such pertinent information would be the amount of time spent with nature, if they had been seeking a change in their lives, or any other such details that contributed to understanding their lived context leading them to their transformative experiences with nature. The amount and detail of this kind of
information varied from co-researcher to co-researcher and one co-researcher even explicitly stated that some details of her personal life, although shared in the interview and potentially of importance in fully understanding her positioning, should be left out and I have honoured that request. For all co-researchers, in an effort at clarity and conciseness, their biographical stories are “told” through my voice, I am not arriving at independent conclusions, I have simply brought together a coherent whole from the extensive information provided by co-researchers, I am simply the narrator. In the end these five biographies are meant to outline each of our personal lives and our lived context leading to and surrounding our transformative experiences with nature. This approach is consistent with heuristic methodology which requires contextualization of each individual’s life and experiences (Moustakas, 1990). The narrative style of writing continues throughout the remaining chapters which aim to paint a clear picture of the essence of the phenomenon.

The next section I worked on was the clarification of individual depictions of the essence of the intersection found in Chapter 5. The challenge with this section was to allow co-researcher quotes to stand much more prominent and clear and to quiet my narrative voice, while bringing together their various quotes ranging from one line to an entire page in a way that was intelligible for the reader. Some heuristic studies simply string together quotes without any other voice present, however those types of studies are only looking at one emotion or experience such as feeling lonely, not the intersection of a cognitive-behavioural experience and the tacit experience of a place. This complication made it necessary for me to provide some degree of bridging; however, I did this while also remaining true to the tradition of using large block quotations and occasionally
having sequential quoting without any narration. By combining some narrative voice and the use of sequential and large block quotations, the individual co-researchers’ constructions of the essence is more available to the reader. Artefacts were included in this section and were usually accompanied by an especially large quote from the co-researcher explaining its meaning. Some quotes are over a page in length, I found it necessary to include this as to allow co-researchers’ voices to be heard, explaining the symbolic representation of the essence of the phenomenon.

The next section I focused on were the two central features of nature and personal transformation. By looking explicitly at these two themes across all co-researchers, I began to better understand some of the characteristics of the essence of the intersection. I deconstructed the large biographies I had originally created for each co-researcher and broke them into collective descriptions of nature and their relationship to nature, experiences of nature-based leisure, experiences and definitions of personal transformation, and finally the outcomes of their transformation. The meanings associated with these themes were not seen as endpoints in themselves, but were situated within the understanding of personal and individual perspectives. This helped me to move from focusing solely on individuals to beginning to see what the collective voice may have to say. In order to aide the reader in understanding the complexity of how co-researchers ultimately experienced and understood the intersection, I have placed these summative, descriptive definitions of nature and personal transformation at the beginning of Chapter 5. By placing these collective co-researcher definitions at the beginning of Chapter 5, the reader is provided with a basic understanding of the main elements before
looking at the detailed, rich description of individual depictions of the essence which run through the rest of Chapter 5.

"The entire process of explication requires that researchers attend to their own awarenesses, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgements as a prelude to the understanding that is derived from conversations and dialogues with others" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). Because I had written my own detailed biography of experience just as I had with the other co-researchers, my own perspectives and experiences were reflected on and dealt with in the same manner as the other co-researchers. Interestingly, the process of communicating my own version of the essence was the most difficult one to construct as I had to sort though and decide what was simply necessary to share, whereas I would have liked to share every detail and moment that held meaning for me. A process of writing, reviewing, stepping away and writing again helped me to eventually get down to just the things I needed to say without overwhelming the reader with detail.

Creative Synthesis

Creative synthesis was the final phase of the heuristic research process and is the final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 6. According to Moustakas (1990), this creative synthesis results in a "narrative depiction" and could include creative artefacts such as paintings or poetry. I knew I was ready to begin to construct the essence when I was comfortable moving between thinking about the data in terms of individual and possible collective meanings while being clear with how each unique individual contributed to the collective voice. At that time I was able to see the data as a whole and began to creatively synthesize the findings into a cumulative essence.
During this phase the essence of the phenomenon was constructed in a narrative written form. All co-researchers’ voices merge into one narrative form. Chapter 6 includes this composite depiction in narrative form as well as a poem by David Whyte (1997).

Verification, Trustworthiness, & Authenticity

The concept of trustworthiness is often closely followed by the omnipresent debate of objectivity and subjectivity. For qualitative heuristic research it is not possible, or desired, to have an “objective” outlook. Instead, the common approach to qualitative—and indeed heuristic—research is to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 1998; Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002; Rossman, 1998) or “‘balance,’ ‘fairness,’ and ‘completeness’” (Patton, 2002, p. 51). This research employed triangulation to assure the reader of trustworthiness. Triangulation, as described by Creswell (1998), is when researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glesne & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1980, 1990). Typically, this process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective. (as quoted in Creswell, p. 202)

I thus employed a combination of peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, member checks, transferability, and confirmability to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.
null
Peer Debriefing

"Peer review or debriefing provides an external check of the research process" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). This external check is to challenge "methods, meanings, and interpretations" (p. 202) of the researcher, while also giving the researcher the opportunity to discuss findings and interpretations with someone who is detached and has a fresh perspective (Guba, 1981).

For this research I had periodic check-ins with my supervisor Dr. Colleen Hood. We would talk about how I was handling the data, what the emerging themes and findings were, and how I was arriving at those conclusions.

Progressive Subjectivity

Progressive subjectivity is sometimes referred to as "clarifying researcher bias" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). This is an especially important aspect of trustworthiness within qualitative research, as it requires the researcher to be upfront with their bias, past experiences and orientations that may influence or inform the research. By being transparent about the researcher’s history and influences, the reader is able to approach the research with a full understanding of potential influences and bias.

The situating of the researcher within the research is somewhat unique to heuristic research however reflexive methodologies are becoming increasingly embraced within leisure research. In 2002, Dupuis published an article in Leisure Sciences calling for wider use of reflexive methods:

I no longer believe that our selves and our emotions and personal experiences can be removed from the research process, nor do I believe that the self, emotions, and more collaborative research styles are
necessarily problematic. On the contrary, I now believe that these aspects are central to strong, rigorous qualitative research and good science. (p. 59)

Throughout the development of this project, my developing ideas and perspectives have been documented in class papers and notes. Throughout this project, I practiced purposeful and diligent reflexivity through journaling to help me to clarify my own ideas and to separate and compare them against or situate them within the rest of the data. This reflexive piece was one of the most important for this project because my own understandings and tacit knowledge were to be explored as a data set (Mousakas, 1990; Patton, 2002; Sela-Smith, 2002). Journaling also provided a way for me to track the development of my ideas and the rationale for changes that emerged as a part of the process. I would journal about the differences or similarities I was noticing between myself and co-researchers and the feelings I had about those differences. This helped me to better understand my own biases as well as emerging themes or unique perspectives held by myself or others. For example the kinds of language we each used to describe our feeling of connection and belonging within nature and our transformations varied from the spiritual to the scientific. I would journal about my own issues with the language used, frustrations with semantics and how to give a collective voice to divergent language. "It seems obvious that we’ve all had the same experience - this profound sense of oneness - but I don’t yet know what language is appropriate to use to describe this. I want to be inclusive of the spiritual and the secular, but is that even possible?" (Emily’s research journal, August 2007). Reflecting on and considering these kinds of issues was a necessary part of understanding the data set but was also an integral part of coming to a
deeper and clearer understanding of my own use of language and a broader understanding of the collective meanings across differences in language use. I was in a constant state of explicitly considering my own experiences and perspectives while simultaneously coming to better understandings of other co-researcher experiences and understandings.

**Member Checks**

The purpose of member checks was to give co-researchers the opportunity to confirm or disconfirm the findings and interpretations (Creswell, 1998; Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002). This could involve giving co-researchers full access to “data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusion” (Creswell, 1998, p. 203). By giving co-researchers the opportunity to evaluate the data or findings, this insures that the researcher has not strayed from the perspectives and knowledge shared by co-researchers. Guba (1981) considers this aspect of trustworthiness to be “the single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion” (p. 85).

Co-researchers were invited to review the composite depiction of the essence. I sent out these findings over email in order to verify that my comprehension was in line with their experiences and understandings of the phenomenon. At this time they had the opportunity to express any concerns, disagreements or to clarify any misinterpretations. Three of the four co-researchers responded and (enthusiastically) confirmed that the composite depiction did indeed capture their experience and understanding. “This composite is great! It really brings to light the inability to pinpoint one set characteristic of being transformed by nature, but rather envelopes the ‘essence’ of the whole thing...congrats on making such a complicated topic coherent!” (personal communication, Adele). “I have had a chance to read your paper, and can't wait to see
the entire project. I am going to re-read it again tonight, as at times my mind was
bumping into that invisible wall of wonder” (personal communication, Quinn).

I wanted to share some of my thoughts because I feel the importance of
your work down to my soul. I am so impressed and touched with your
findings. Although some of the experiences were not mine, they were
mine. I am in awe of how our experiences and feelings are the same. As
I've re-read The Essence many times I continue to be brought to
awareness. (personal communication, Naomi)

Maya informed me that her current life circumstance was such that she may not be able to
review the findings and unfortunately I did not hear from her again.

Transferability and Thick Description

The purpose of thick description is to give the reader a comprehensive picture of
the situation from which the findings have come. By providing such description, the
reader is able to decide for himself/herself whether the findings are applicable to his/her
own specific situation (Creswell, 1998; Guba, 1981; Patton, 2002).

Thick description was particularly important for this research because of the
highly contextualized nature of the understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. The
conclusions of this study are not generalizeable, however thick description purposefully
situates the findings within the specific context of this study and experiences of co-
researchers. In contextualizing the findings with rich descriptions the goal was to paint a
clear enough picture of the tacit intersection of nature and personal transformation that
the reader could decide for themselves whether the findings were applicable to their own
particular situation or perspective. This description is an essence, not a rule or theory.
Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's methods of being subjectively reflexive and accountable for interpretative findings in such a way that readers can be assured of credibility (Guba, 1981). Because this study seeks the description of an essence and not theory development, it is necessary and appropriate to address confirmability of descriptive interpretation.

As such, I used narrative quotes and purposefully maintained co-researchers' holistic depictions to allow for an easy-to-follow development of the descriptive essence. The development of themes and descriptions were well documented through journaling and progressive versions of biographic narratives of the co-researchers, thus allowing the progression of ideas and interpretation to be easily retraced.

By employing these varied approaches to trustworthiness, the reader should be assured that this research is, in the words of Patton (2002), balanced, fair and complete. By using the above combination of research checks, I aspired to achieve a high degree of transparency. The embeddedness of the researcher and the holistic development of the project was as integrally important as the data itself, with the processes of reflexivity, methodology, interviewing, and synthesis seen as central to the outcomes. Thus, this project stayed true to the heuristic method by explicitly claiming the importance of and attention to all ways in which the researcher perceives, experiences, interprets and potentially resists the research process. By putting in appropriate checks and balances, I ensured a trustworthy conclusion.
CHAPTER 4

My application of the heuristic method has been adapted to accommodate for the unique complexity of the phenomenon in question, the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. Heuristic methods are usually applied to study a single, solitary phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). This study is indeed concerned with the singular phenomenon of transformation, but transformation that stands at the intersection of the context, space, place, and lived experience of nature-based leisure. Thus, instead of simply having a single essence to describe, I felt the need to describe both of the elements that intersect to create the phenomenon in question, as well as describing the phenomenon itself. In consequence, I have somewhat adapted the traditional presentation of heuristic findings to accommodate for this unique situation. In the following paragraphs I will outline exactly how the data is presented in the subsequent chapters and where and when I diverge from a traditional heuristic presentation of the findings.

First, let me say that most qualitative research moves through data analysis from individual accounts to themes, and then findings are presented as collective themes. The heuristic method however, is concerned with maintaining the individual co-researcher’s voice through much of data analysis and the presentation of findings (Moustakas, 1990). As discussed in Chapter 3, heuristics is under the umbrella of the constructivist paradigm and values the unique situatedness and perspective of individual co-researchers. This valuing of the diversity and complexity of lived experiences is arguably a strength of heuristic research. Thus, it is important for the reader to be familiar with the lived context of co-researchers leading to our encounters with the phenomenon. There is no one way or right way to address contextualizing co-researchers’ lives and so I chose to
address this by providing descriptive biographies of co-researchers in Chapter 4. Another standard practice of heuristic research is to present the individual co-researcher
depictions of the essence prior to them providing a collective description (Moustakas, 1990). *Individual depictions* could be as simple as a series of quotes, or presented in a more narrative style, via the primary co-researcher. Again, due to the unique complexity of this particular study, I chose to combine these methods, using many (and sometimes large) direct quotations and then wove these together using my narrative voice for the purpose of readability and to ease navigation through the intersecting elements of the phenomenon. These individual depictions of the essence are provided in Chapter 5. Alongside these individual depictions in Chapter 5 are collective descriptive definitions or understandings of personal transformation, nature and also the transformative outcomes of experiencing the phenomenon. This addition to Chapter 5 is not common practice in heuristic presentation of findings, but was necessary in order to give the reader a complete understanding of how the final essence was arrived at in Chapter 6. The culminating piece of heuristic research is referred to as the *creative synthesis* (Moustakas, 1990). The presentation of a creative synthesis in this research project is precisely in line with the unique form of narrative and creative presentation of the essence of the phenomenon as outlined by heuristic methodology. Chapter 6 should be read as the collective voice, there are no quotations, only a narrative, descriptive account of the *composite depiction* of the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. In line with the creative expectation of the presentation of heuristic research, I have also included a poem and painting which serve to further demonstrate in artistic form, our collective understanding of the essence of the phenomenon.
To clarify what will unfold in the following chapters, here is a brief guide to voice-representation and presentation style. The individual voice is heard through Chapter 4 (descriptive biographies of co-researchers) and Chapter 5 combines individual voice (individual depictions of the essence) and collective voice (summative descriptions of personal transformation, nature, and transformative outcomes). Chapter 6, the final culminating piece of this research project presents only the collective voice in a creative synthesis including the composite depiction of the essence. I have chosen to split the biographies (Chapter 4) from the individual depictions of the essence (Chapter 5) as not to overwhelm the reader with information. The biographies in Chapter 4 offer succinct overviews to familiarize the reader with the lived context of co-researchers while Chapter 5 provides in-depth, thick description of the co-researcher’s actual accounts of the phenomenon.

Chapter 4 contains descriptive biographies of the primary co-researcher (myself) and my co-researchers Adele, Maya, Quinn, and Naomi. These biographies are meant to outline our personal lives and the context leading to and surrounding our transformative experiences with nature. The biographies are comprised of all pertinent background information, including basic demographic information and any other information provided by the co-researchers that clarified and contextualized their life experience leading to their transformative encounters with nature-based leisure. These descriptions are intended to be accessible and story-like, taking you through the context of our lives, and leading to our transformations. In an effort towards clarity and conciseness, the biographical stories of all co-researchers are “told” through my voice. I am not arriving at independent conclusions, I have simply brought together a coherent whole from the
extensive information provided by co-researchers – I am simply the narrator. This approach is consistent with heuristic methodology which requires contextualization of each individual’s life and experiences (Moustakas, 1990). This narrative style of writing sets the tone for the remaining chapters which aim to paint a clear and accessible picture of the essence of the phenomenon. Furthermore, you will notice that I often use italics within quotes. The purpose of this is to aide you in navigating the substantial amount of information provided. I only inserted italics once the project was completely written, at that point upon re-reading the findings sections it was apparent that italics would be a helpful aide in highlighting the most pertinent information within quotes. I chose italicizing over editing or cutting quotes in order to allow the reader to get a full sense of the ideas and perspectives being expressed by co-researchers.

It must be noted that pseudonyms have been assigned to all co-researchers (except myself) and their friends and family and some details of their personal lives have been altered or omitted in order to ensure anonymity. For example, the names of home cities, well known places of work or schools or specific identifying names related to co-researchers’ nature-based leisure experiences may have been altered. I exercised some discretion and judgement, recognizing that those from smaller communities would be easier to identify had the complete details of their home life and experiences been shared. Furthermore, because of the locations and organizations associated with nature-based leisure experiences of some participants, I have altered some of the names of places, leisure providers, lakes, and mountain ranges. I have left my own name and life details intact to ensure the transparency of my own lived experiences and potential biases.
It should also be noted that there may seem to be variability between representations of co-researchers in this chapter in terms of the volume of information as well as the depth of detail. This should not be read as preference for one co-researcher over another but instead as an honest representation of the amount of detail, clarity and understanding of their context shared during the interviews. Some co-researchers’ transformative experiences were specifically linked to a particular time frame or place, and in consequence there is more detail and in-depth description about those times or places – simply because there was more detail provided by the co-researcher. Other co-researchers however had more of a mosaic of experiences and identified their transformative outcomes to a combination of times, places, and encounters. For co-researchers with a mosaic of experiences there was understandably not as much depth about a particular experience as there was a breadth of description and thus their biographies may read likewise. In the end, the diversity of all co-researchers’ experiences and perspectives are equally valued contributions that render thick descriptions of the essence. Please note that throughout Chapter 4 and 5 block quotes are single-spaced for readability because of their length.

*Co-Researcher Stories*

*Emily*

I was born and raised in downtown Ottawa where I lived with my parents and two older brothers in a townhouse backing on a quiet section of the Rideau Canal. The parkland around the canal has big old trees that grow tall and proud and at any given moment you are guaranteed to see happy dogs and children roaming the grassy spaces on
the other side of the canal from our house. It is a unique setting by the standards of any downtown area, allowing me to include casual time with nature as an unappreciated but integral part of my daily life such as walking the canal with my Mom or studying on the porch overlooking the waterway scene.

My childhood was undeniably that of a city-girl, but a city-girl with a draw to the world outside. Every weekend between December and March from the time I was born until I was 13 were spent at our chalet in Quebec where downhill skiing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing or simply wandering the woods surrounding our chalet comprised a standard weekend. When we were not at the chalet I was on horseback. Between the ages of 9 and 14, I would spend eight weeks a summer at riding camp and during the school year my ever-so-generous mother would chauffeur me 5 days a week out to the barn, 45 minutes away. I also played volleyball and enjoyed being active but I was never one for competition in any form; anything I did I mainly enjoyed because it either brought me outside or together with friends. I remember a look of disappointment on the face of my goal-driven riding coach when I declared I didn’t care if I ever won, I just wanted my horse to be happy.

My time in the outdoors came to a rather abrupt end between the ages of 13 and 15 respectively, at which points we sold the chalet and my horse passed away unexpectedly. My involvement with all things outdoorsy fell away and with that a foundational aspect of my identity, competence and life-meaning went missing. This nature-drought extended into my early twenties, during which time I played volleyball, dabbled in rowing and went to the gym. These years of drought were marked by the usual teenage angst but also by minor depressions and a continual sense of dissatisfaction
and of “being lost”. Like so many girls I got caught up in superficial preoccupations of image and social expectations, peer pressure and simply bad decision making. I was somewhat of a lost cause through high school, disgruntled and confused, I didn’t know what I wanted but I wanted something different, I wanted to feel different.

My first two years of university were on par for the average kid, I partied, went to the gym, worked as a tour guide and residence don, and I studied enough to maintain an acceptable “B” average. I was a pretty miserable person but from the outside I seemed happy enough with lots of friends and a ready smile. Underneath it all however I was being eaten away by something I couldn’t put my finger on.

The summer following my second year at university I hit a low. I was put on anti-anxiety medicine, feeling sad, frustrated and completely overwhelmed with an intangible dissatisfaction but with no obvious reason to feel that way. It was the summer of my 21st birthday and two months into the summer, fed up with my mindless summer job and feeling like a med-induced zombie, I knew I needed a big change. I asked my parents to send me on a month-long Outward Bound trip for my birthday. They generously agreed and I chose the 21-day “Adult Mountain Venture” course. I had no experience and no idea what to expect but I felt a sense of excitement and relief at the idea of disappearing into the B.C. mountains. This trip was a turning point in my life.

Although nothing dramatic happened upon my return, that Outward Bound experience had planted a seed in my soul. I wanted to bring home all of the good feelings and to get involved with the Outdoor Club at my university but my peer group had no interest and I found myself slipping back into old habits and depressions. All through my last two years of university I was constantly looking opportunities to get away, to
experience something different: Youth Challenge International, Katimavic, another Outward Bound course but nothing worked out. It was not until I graduated that my next adventure would come to fruition.

I worked and saved my money for eight months following graduation and then immediately took off on a six month solo adventure around New Zealand and Australia. I hiked the backcountry of these two beautiful countries, hitch-hiking from track to track, meeting kind and unusual strangers and rediscovering my self along the way. A few people I met on trail suggested that I look into the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). Sure enough within eight months of returning to Canada I was heading to Wyoming to meet fourteen new friends and begin a technically-intensive, three-month NOLS “Outdoor Educator Semester”. My life, path, and sense of self have been undeniably shaped by these and other experiences with nature.

The version of my self that I experienced in the backcountry was a far cry from the depressed, anxiety-ridden and frustrated woman I was in the city. After each experience in the backcountry I would grow and learn a little bit more about my self, my values, and the truth of who I was without the masks and the usual external influences of friends, family, and social norms. My journey however, to fully understand the implications and outcomes of these experiences and my renewed relationship with nature would only begin to be fully understood once I began my academic journey as a Master’s student at Brock University.

Adele

Adele and I met at a wooden cabin surrounded by dense forest on a warm summer evening. She admires the cabin, the natural fibres and gentle feel of this wooden house;
noting that this is the type of home she dreams of and I have to agree it feels perfectly serene.

Adele is 26, an outdoor-loving city girl who has always had an attraction to nature and fondly recalls her father teaching her the names of trees, plants and insects as a child; names that she remembers most clearly to this day. Although she always knew in her heart that nature was a special place for her, she did not spend as much time in nature through her teens and early twenties as she does now. Adele always enjoyed camping, whether out of a car, or venturing further into the backcountry in a canoe. However, competitive sports, dedication to her studies and a desire to remain close to home, friends, and university life kept her out of the forests and streams, and more familiar with the urban jungle and chlorinated pools. Even so her attraction to and curiosity about nature remained in her heart and as she progressed through university her path eventually brought her full circle, back to nature.

Adele now enjoys her work as a biologist in field ecology after completing her Master of Science degree from a central Canadian university. This wasn’t any ordinary graduate degree however, her research brought her out of the urban jungle and back into forests, out of the pool and into the lakes and rivers of Northern Ontario where she spent four months a year living in a remote wilderness research station. Like most graduate students, Adele did not anticipate that her thesis project would become a personal journey of growth and learning beyond the books and in this case an experience of being transformed by her time with nature.

Adele has fond memories of her time up North. She has come to a place of appreciation and understanding of the value of her experience and also the value and
place of nature in her ongoing development and continued well-being. This transformative experience however was not expected or sought-out. Adele was at the beginning of her graduate degree, having not even attended a single class, she was sent straight up North for field work, a situation she greeted with resistance and uncertainty. Reminiscing about that time, she laughs recalling her certainty in herself and yet her apprehension in leaving friends, family and her boyfriend behind.

For four months, a rustic research station in the wilds of Northern Ontario was her new home, quiet lakes and untamed forests her neighbourhood, and the abundant wildlife, and self-proclaimed “eco-geek” researchers, her new friends and family. As reluctant and resistant as her start may have been, within two weeks she settled into the pace and began to embrace the unique culture and opportunities of this place.

Much of Adele’s time was dedicated to scientific observation and calculation of the lives and particulars of certain Northern creatures. During her leisure time, she enjoyed solo canoe adventures, group campfires at base camp, awe-inspiring sunsets, skinny dipping on isolated beaches, and star gazing late into the night. It didn’t take her long to realize that this was a unique opportunity and special place that she should fully take advantage of – and she did.

Both work and play at the research station varied between independent excursions and group efforts and gatherings. The space and opportunity to be alone in nature was particularly meaningful and catalytic for Adele but the social context and culture was also refreshingly unfamiliar. Adele’s fellow researchers provided her with a social environment unlike any other she had experienced. It was a place where her passion for science and love of the outdoors merged amongst people who shared similar interests and
values, she tells me: “Oh yeah! A definite different culture. Oh yeah it was the extreme opposite, [at home] we’d be like ‘ok someone talk and please break the silence’. But [up North] if someone talked it’d be like ‘shut up I’m listening to the trees’ [laughs]” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele). The setting and culture of the research station also inherently encouraged exploration of the surrounding areas and it was commonplace for people to wander off for a day of solo exploration outside of their research. In looking back, Adele believes it was on these adventures that she had her most profound experiences with nature, for it was within nature that she began to more consciously explore and experience the true nature of her being.

Aside from some computers and other research-related technology, the station itself was rustic and without much besides the basic necessities. Living amongst nature in such an intensive way was a new experience for Adele, as was the more simplistic lifestyle. She stated that it was not so much the physical place of the research station that provided her with inspiring or catalytic moments, but the nature-based leisure pursuits available to her. The research station and its surrounding forests and water ways became a familiar and comfortable place for Adele; a place that she explored everyday in both her work and leisure pursuits. This combination of being in a new physical setting with an accompanying lifestyle change and also developing a sense of comfort in that place, situated Adele to be both open and very mindful of her experiences in nature.

Within this mind-space of comfort and curiosity, of awareness and appreciation, Adele was open to discovering both the landscape around her, and also herself within this new yet familiar space of nature. Her moments of connection, clarity and calm were the catalysts for changes far beyond her zen-like afternoons in the sun, ultimately resulting in
[Redacted text]
the sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious changes in her sense of self, relationships, and outlook on life.

_Maya_

I drove to Maya’s house by way of back roads, through small towns, and picturesque vistas of rolling hills and quiet lakes. When I arrived at her home I took in the scene: horses grazing in green pastures, a home of stone with big windows from east to west glinting in the bright noon sun. Maya and her two friendly dogs greeted me at the door and she guided me around the house to an enclosed circle of cedar hedges that stand 10 feet tall. A wooden archway with a small iron table marked the opening to the circle and Maya paused there. Two rocks sat upon the table and she invited me to rub them together while holding an intention in my mind. This was her ritual before entering the cedar circle and I was happy to participate. I set the intention of having a clear mind and an open heart.

Maya is a 43 year old health care worker, a friendly and soft-spoken woman with a jolly laugh. Maya still lives in the same small but lively community where she was born, a place bordered by beautiful water, rolling farmland and untouched forests. She grew up in a conservative Catholic family with traditional values and beliefs, instilling in her a sensitivity to social expectations, which for years bounded her confidence to explore her own truth, purpose and passions.

Maya has always enjoyed the world of nature. As a child she was struck by a curiosity and sense of awe when star gazing or wandering the local forested trails. She has always felt a special connection to animals, simply enjoying their company and their
beautifully simple ways of being. Maya’s relationship with nature and deep sense of connection however would only be fully appreciated later in life.

Fifteen years ago Maya was laid-off from her job and simultaneously encountered the opportunity to expand her healing repertoire through a therapeutic touch program. Once Maya took this step beyond her comfort zone and into the world of alternative healing practices, the floodgates opened and her desire for knowledge and personally expanding experiences were unleashed. She soon found herself under the wing of an old friend and bravely heading North on her first Shamanic vision quest. Since then, Maya has again and again turned to nature-based experiences, and especially Native healing arts, in seeking knowledge and self-expansion, from intensive spiritual healing groups to casual rides with her horse. Nature-based experiences slowly became an integral part of her growth and healing repertoire. For Maya, transformative experiences are most commonly encountered within the context of nature, and often when she is alone but other times she has been a part of a group experience. Her solo experiences have ranged from simply taking quiet time with her horse, to one to four day solo vision quests in the wilderness where she had only her thoughts and shamanic ceremonies accompanying her in nature. Maya’s group experiences have included spiritual healing groups in rural settings that are surrounded by the wilderness of the North Western United States. Each experience brought its own unique challenges and outcomes, conquering fears of the dark and learning to own her voice and place within a group. At times the novelty and newness of the situation played a major factor in giving her the space to experience herself differently but on other occasions she was in a place of comfort with nature, like riding her horse or paddling down a stream.
Maya’s search for knowledge, healing, and self-expanding experiences were not guided by an entirely conscious goal or purpose, but by an instinct of a childhood wonderment of the stars and the feeling that some personally significant purpose was to be found in this mysterious universe. Once she discovered nature as a safe place for contemplation, connection and healing, the answers of her childhood wonderings of purpose began to be answered. She tells me quite frankly, “Well without nature Emily, I wouldn’t be who I am today” (Nature Interview with Maya).

Quinn

Quinn and I met in a small town that served as a halfway point for each of us off of a North-bound Ontario highway. We planned to chat at a café but it was closed so we headed to the other side of this small town where a spacious park met the lake. Quinn chose a spot that sheltered us (especially the recorder) from the gentle but persistent wind blowing across the wide open lake. We settled in at the base of a small grassy hill with trees to one side, shoreline foliage in front of us and open green grass to the other side – we were both glad that the café was closed, this was a beautiful spot.

Quinn is a 26 year-old man from Northern Ontario. He has the type of gentle and genuine demeanour that I would expect from a person who grew up on a lake beyond the borders of a small Northern town. In his childhood, nature was his playground and companion, “…that’s what I did growing up, I’d try to rifle through all of my homework while I was watching the lake, watching the wind direction, watching the sun, watching the time, it was always like a reward, a reward for getting my work done. Um, so growing up I loved it…” (Nature Interview with Quinn). His close relationship with nature and the freedom of self that it afforded him always gave Quinn the sense that he
was different; it is difficult to say exactly how he was different but he knew he wasn’t like the “town kids”.

In high school, like all teenagers, he was overwhelmed by a strong desire to fit in and the result was a slow shift away from the open-hearted, nature-loving kid he’d always been. This drift away from his connection with nature was furthered by moving away to university – to a significantly larger city – where drinking, a sedentary lifestyle, and material preoccupation became the new cornerstones of his lived experience. He found himself feeling increasingly dissatisfied with his life and uncertain of where to turn and what had gone wrong. His frustration and inner turmoil culminated in a few near-death accidents, bouts of depression, and the ending of a significant relationship. He found little comfort in the advice of his friends and family and eventually turned back to the one place that had always served as his safe haven – nature.

Although Quinn feels connected to all of nature, he has a special relationship with a small island on a lake near his parent’s home. This is a place he went with his family as a child and a place that he now returns to for healing and transformation. It is a sacred area known to be an ancient hunting ground for First Nations people, a place where animals roam freely and until recently, the forests were untouched. Immersed in this environment he feels both completely at home and in awe of nature; it is this special place that sets the stage for his transformation. As Quinn told stories of this island it became very clear both how special it is to him and how beautiful it must be:

... it’s just a small island, it’s no bigger than the parking lot [size of a baseball diamond] but there’s nothing on it, it’s just [laughing] well significant geological structures and stuff like that but um, and it made me think like “wow” I didn’t really realize how much I loved this place, how much I really miss nature...I just love to get out there, it’s just a great place to just, it’s not even thinking, it’s just um, simplifying, getting rid of
all of the unnecessary stuff, it’s um, you know you can buy stress relief in pill bottles, go wait in an emergency room for 10 hours for a prescription to make you feel, to forget about what you’re experiencing that day, but everyone should have their own island, I just came to that conclusion. Like, lucky, I am so lucky to have that kayak to paddle there with at any time and no one else uses the lake and you look around when you’re on this island and there’s no buildings or power lines, you’re just, I mean it’s similar to this [we were sitting at the base of a small grassy hill with tall grass and shrubs grown up from the water in front of us, giving us a partial view of the lake and opposing hills and sky with the sound of cars coming from the highway a kilometre or so away], but you can’t even hear cars, it’s a, and animals everywhere....I like to sit under this tree on this big erratic boulder and just sitting there and feeling um, it’s almost like someone’s hit the reset button, when you come back from the city and it’s like, for me I go there to um, it’s a recharge...like I always thought that it was just a cool place to go growing up, like we used to take our dog down there and stuff but when you’re away from it for so long and you go back, like I was just back there last week again and we had a full lit sky of stars on Friday night, with loons calling all night, they almost sounded like wolves – like really long howls, like haunting - and at the same time the moon was lighting up the whole lake and we have northern lights to the north, so we’re just kicking back at the camp fire like [laughing], you know this, this is where I want to be.... (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

Quinn’s special island served as the staging ground for his transformative experience, a turning point in his life when he reconnected with his true sense of self and purpose.

Naomi

Expansive fields of soy and corn lead me all the way to Naomi’s house where she lives with her husband, teenage daughter, dog and cats. When I step out of my car and take in her neighbourhood, I realize I can see farmers’ fields at one end of her street and the main drag of the small town at the other. Even looking out of her kitchen window I am greeted by the sight of a majestic old oak tree standing in the middle of the farmer’s field that borders her property. I find myself thinking that this is truly the most unexpected place to find a Detroit investment banker.
Naomi is in her late 40’s, a woman whose life is perhaps best described as a constant state of motion. She grew up in the Detroit area, one of seven children in a large Irish-Italian family that she tells me is characteristically loud and busy. She was raised with traditional Catholic values which instilled in her a valuing of family above self and modesty above self-expression. The landscape of Naomi’s childhood included mainly urban settings but family visits to her grandparents’ property by the Mississippi River in Iowa made an impression on her. She told me that her appreciation of nature began during those visits, “…It’s beautiful, still now, it’s one of my favourite places. So I would have a glimpse of appreciation [of nature] but not um, not to the extent that I think I do now” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi).

Although Naomi has a special attachment to the rocky hills of Iowa, her relationship with and exploration of nature was quite limited through most of her life. Naomi’s adult life, like her childhood has been a primarily an urban-focused existence and also like her childhood, family was the centerpiece of her life. Although her own immediate family includes only three people and she now lives in a farming community, Naomi has managed to remain true to her roots of constant motion.

For five days a week, Naomi commutes to Detroit where she works a fast-paced job in a high stress environment. At the end of her investment banking workday she begins her second job as the official chauffeur of her teenage daughter, Maggie, who has a passion for all things outside, especially horses. Naomi loves her family and her daughter and husband have always been at the centre of her life. Although Naomi loves her family and in many ways enjoys her career, she says that her entire life had been an unconscious, non-questioning process:
...my life was guided by things that were given to me, that I just accepted without really ever thinking of them, you know – religion, um, you know what you do for a living, how you operate in day-to-day life and you never, at least I didn’t think: “well does this really fit for me?” “Is there you know, another way?” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

One of the characteristics of this unconsciously lived life was the material oriented lifestyle that her career afforded them, a lifestyle that is a norm in North America. “Well I think that’s a big part in me, I think we tend to be ego-driven, um, especially in North America, um you know, bigger, better, faster, more…” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi). This consumption and image driven outlook did not serve her well. Like so many women, her recreational activities were centered on body-shaping over well-being or concern for having a meaningful experience, “…but it was always about you know that, swimming was about getting in the pool and um, you know doing the work out, you…it was just about that activity - I never did things for the purpose of doing them, always a goal oriented person…” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi). Reflecting on her father’s death she tells me how external preoccupation and other-focused orientation distracted her from her own feelings and demonstrated her lack of a grounded sense of self.

I did not have good coping mechanisms; with my Dad I was still in the external you know, of how you dress and how you look and how you know, how other people perceive you instead of you know, in-going-out, it was all out-going-in, it makes it so much more difficult to get through those life changing events. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

In the last eight years, Naomi has slowly and steadily moved into a more conscious and internally driven life-space in which she feels healthier and more centered.
The first movements towards these changes were simultaneously inspired by Maggie maturing and a series of nature-based experiences,

Maggie’s pushing away um, which is like I think the normal process but then I’m all of the sudden filled with anxiety “what should I do, what am I going to do, oh my god!” I you know, I thrive on being busy um, all of the sudden I was just jumping out of my skin, I’m you know, now I’m frantic because I don’t have to do what I did before – what’s my life supposed to be now? (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

But before Maggie began to push away, they embarked on a journey to Colorado that brought Naomi out of her usual routines and into the great outdoors. Visiting family in Colorado, Naomi, a very home-centered person, already felt out of her comfort zone. However a chance airport encounter with a charming cowboy led to Naomi agreeing to accompany her eight year old horse loving daughter on a horse packing adventure through the San Juan Mountains. This first intensive nature-based experience was the first of many transformative experiences with nature. As Naomi shared in her Demographic Information Sheet, her appetite for nature grew from there and since then almost every year she has sought out a different experience with nature.

It seems over the last 8 to 10 years I have been leaning toward more outdoor, nature-based vacations, i.e. horse ranch in Colorado, Dog Sledding – Northern Minnesota, several Edge adventures – canoeing, kayaking, a Vision Quest in 2005. Vacations that do not have an outdoor purpose – a wedding in Arizona, we found opportunities to experience nature and the outdoors. For me there hasn’t been one specific experience that led to change but rather a series of experiences that led to gradual, incredible change, and a wonderful contentment. (p. 1)

Naomi’s appetite for nature was motivated by the unique lived experience of nature-based leisure; it was unlike anything she had ever encountered. She experienced nature as a special place for rediscovering her self and for interacting with her world in ways she never had before.
Um I think because of the work that I’ve done, that’s all been nature based, I think um it’s been all such positive experiences, that you know you can’t go back. Like, once you’re awakened to this, once you’re awakened to this um this life and what’s out there you can’t really get it anywhere else, it’s, you know, like the other things that I’ve done to try to feel good, you know the outward things like, I’ll get a new outfit or I’ll get a manicure or it’s yeah, that’s good and it lasts about 20 minutes but the feelings you get are so much deeper when you can appreciate and it’s a prayerful, spiritual experience and when you can get that as much as you want just by stepping out the door. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

These nature-based experiences provided Naomi with not only a unique context and set of activities but also the opportunity to engage with people who were either on a similar seeking path or more importantly, those who were living out their dreams, leading lifestyles she had never considered. These many and varied nature-based experiences have served an important function in Naomi’s being, transforming her sense of self, relationships and outlook on life.

By now I hope you feel somewhat familiar and comfortable with who the co-researchers are and with their unique lived contexts. These descriptive narrative biographies were intended to give the reader a foundation from which to move forward into a description of co-researchers’ experiences of and perspectives on their experiences of nature-based leisure and personal transformation. Chapter 5 will continue with a focus on the individual depictions of the essence.
CHAPTER 5

The layout of Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are best viewed as building blocks towards the essence of the intersection. Chapter 4 laid the necessary groundwork for understanding the situatedness of co-researchers' lives. Chapter 5 goes one step further, providing in-depth, thick description of individual co-researcher accounts of the phenomenon, as well as collective definitions of personal transformation and nature, and a summarizing description of the transformative outcomes of all co-researchers. The collective definitions of personal transformation and nature are necessary to consider in order to more clearly understand the individual depictions of the essence. Furthermore, the individual depictions of the essence provided in the second section of Chapter 5 are necessary for the reader to consider in order to be able to decide for himself/herself whether the composite depiction provided in Chapter 6 is relevant to the reader's own situation or understanding. Finally, a collective perspective on the transformative outcomes of co-researchers' encounters with the phenomenon is also provided because it is important to outline as part of the progress towards describing the composite depiction of the essence in Chapter 6. Thus, the individual and collective co-researcher voices in this chapter are the building blocks for understanding the final culminating piece, the creative synthesis in Chapter 6, including a composite depiction of the essence as expressed by a collective voice.

Before exploring the co-researchers' detailed and varied accounts of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure I have provided summative descriptive definitions of nature and personal transformation. These "definitions" are a result of the collective voice of co-researchers and by understanding
Evidently
these foundational concepts it is easier to move through their individual experiences. These collective definitions are an addition to the usual heuristic presentation of findings, and were included because most heuristic research does not deal with an intersecting phenomenon and thus this particular research needs slightly more clarification and background information than single-concept heuristic research. The meanings associated with these definitions are not to be seen as endpoints in themselves, but are foundational to understanding individual perspectives of the essence.

*Co-researcher Constructions of Nature and Personal Transformation*

The following section on co-researcher constructions of nature and personal transformation are summative descriptions as experienced and understood by the co-researchers as a collective voice. These constructions were developed through a review of individual perspectives and were then brought together to create descriptive definitions of personal transformation and a contextualizing outline of the perceptions of and beliefs about nature. By outlining personal transformation and nature, the intention was to provide a foundation from which the essence of the phenomenon could be more transparently examined in the second section of Chapter 5 (individual depictions) and Chapter 6 (composite depiction). Co-researcher voices were embedded to demonstrate the shared (or divergent) understandings of their experiences, although for simplicity, not all voices were used to demonstrate each dimension — each voice will be clear in the individual depictions.
According to co-researchers’ reports, nature was an integral contributor to their transformative experiences. Each co-researcher sought or embraced nature as a special lived context for (re)discovering himself/herself. Although they had unique perspectives and language to describe how nature had contributed to, or created their transformative experience, there was an overarching theme to the value and role nature played. What are most pertinent to highlight were their descriptions of humans as a part of nature; their awareness of the totality of nature; their deep sense of connection to nature; their view of nature as the embodiment of truth; and finally their identification with the rhythms of nature. These perspectives serve to foreshadow the description and discussion of the essence of the intersection of nature-based leisure and personal transformation.

*Humans as a part of nature.* It must first be understood that all co-researchers believed humans to be a part of nature. They either originally felt or developed a close sense of relatedness to nature.

I am one of those people that thinks of humans as animals; we are animals. You know, when someone’s like “oh we’re not animals” I’m like “oh yes we are” [laughs], “just crazy animals” [laughs]! Oh definitely, humans are nature, *anything natural to me is part of nature*, you know plastics and stuff like that are not part of nature. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

There was agreement that humans are physically as much a part of nature as a flower or a bird. The conscious human animal however, has a distinguishing characteristic, the capability of intentional, rationalized behaviour. Thus the harm that humans were said to often cause to nature, made us different from the rest of nature.

I would say [humans] are part of the system, *we are nature* but...I look at us as being um, *creating trauma*, [laughs] to the Earth right ...So yeah it’s like I think maybe humans are almost, like a, we’re definitely part of
...
nature, we are nature.... I mean deep down we’re just *products of the Earth* right. (Nature Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

This differentiating characteristic of humans will be seen to play out in co-researchers’ discussions of how nature embodies an altruistic purpose, their identification with the rhythms of nature, as well as their deep sense of connection to nature and of course, in their transformative outcomes.

*The totality of nature.* Both in a physical and non-physical sense, the co-researchers expressed – in varying ways – the thought of nature as being everywhere and/or permeating everything. “Nature is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (unknown author, quote provided by Adele). In practical terms this meant that pieces of nature could be found anywhere, like seeing a river flowing through a big city from the vantage point of a highrise window. “Um I think [nature is] anything that’s *not manmade*, so you can pretty much find it you know anywhere if you look hard enough you know, whether obviously the normal stuff, trees, grass” (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added). Adele also expressed this sense of her awareness of and appreciation for nature’s presence, as she was telling me nature was an important setting for her transformative experiences:

> And the settings always seem to be completely *out in the middle of nowhere* in the wilderness or while *observing some phenomenon of nature* so-to-speak. Whether a magnificent sunset over [my University] when I’m walking to the car one night, and even though I’m not completely in the middle of the wilderness but it’s that I have, that *I notice these things*, that totally *brings me back* to the whole realm of you know our great earth and who we are treading upon it. (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

The former perspective, that nature is literally everywhere and permeates everything was described using either secular or spiritual language. The message was
consistent across all co-researchers however that there is an interconnection between all things and beings, and that interconnection is nature. Adele was most vocal about this concept in secular terms:

Nature is what makes the world go round, it’s what ties everything together, it’s the life breath of everything that exists…. for me when I like look at nature or think of nature, I don’t just think of nature but the biocomplexity of it, like how everything is intricate and effecting each other and you know the type of tree there is influencing the other trees that grow around it you know. So nature to me is kind of the life source of everything that is I guess you could say. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

You know it’s definitely not a religion, it’s not something that I idolize or that I’m like “wow, there’s energy” [laughing] you know, it’s more just like everyday it’s there and it’s to be respected and that’s part of how, I think that’s how we’re all connected as humans and how nature’s all connected and how ecosystems are connected like everything, I think that’s part of the communication of things like there’s the, the physical like sound communication and tactile communications and stuff but I think this is almost like the sixth sense of communications between things and I think that science can’t yet fully explain it (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Maya expressed this concept of the interconnection of all things in a more spiritual sense, describing this energetic connection linked to a heightened spiritual awareness.

Emily – Did your evolving relationship with [your horse] have anything to do with your various transformations?
Maya – I would say yes, yeah. ‘Cause it’s about awareness I think, understanding that more – that you know, the whole connection, the oneness, um, resonance part of things, that things vibrate you know, how um that effects things you know your mood, your body language, all of those things, yes, yes, I’ve become so aware of all of that stuff, all of that stuff how it affects and yes, very much so. As I’ve grown in my awareness of my spiritual self, I’ve definitely had a transformative experience, an increased awareness of the interconnection of all things [unclear]. (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

Regardless of the language used, the resulting idea was that nature (i.e. energy, Spirit) weaves together all things and beings in an intricate, connected system that begins and
ends with nature. This perspective influenced all co-researchers to carry with them a constant awareness of nature, whether it be a heightened awareness and appreciation of natural phenomena occurring within urban centres or feeling more tuned into a more profound sense of awareness of the intricacies of the interdependence of all of life. These perspectives were heightened by (or evolved out of) their transformative experiences with nature, experiences which all occurred within close proximity to, or within full immersion in nature.

*A deep sense of connection.* Each co-researcher had one (or more) special place(s) within a natural setting with which they felt connected; these are the places they associated with their transformative experiences. Co-researchers used the language of wholeness with(in), oneness with(in), and appreciation of nature to describe their sense of connection and place. Quinn spoke of the importance of developing a relationship with a specific place, “you can go out in nature and you can go to all kinds of different places, but I think the more you go to the same spot, it’s almost like you a build a trust between what’s there and yourself” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn). This type of relationship and sense of safety was echoed by other participants who attributed their transformative experiences to feeling accepted and thus being open to learning about themselves within that environment:

Maya – …The unassuming part of it, you know, it is there right. Yeah the unassuming part of it, it’s just I don’t know, it’s just peacefulness for me.

Emily – Nature is unassuming of you?

Maya – Yes, it’s just like you know you can be here and it’s not asking anything of you or you asking anything of it, it’s just you’re here. It has life in it, it has a vibrancy of it’s own, it has a just so much beauty. I think the biggest thing is the *peacefulness*. (Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)
Feeling free from assumptions, expectations, roles, and externally imposed norms was a major factor in co-researchers developing a kind of relationship with their special place(s) in nature. This relationship or sense of place led to a deep sense of connection to and appreciation for nature, which further contributed to openness to exploring and experiencing themselves in relation to nature.

*Nature, the embodiment of truth.* Nature as embodied truth was a concept that came up repeatedly with all co-researchers. Nature was seen as being what it is, without external influence or interference, it simply “is what it is” and each physical manifestation of nature was thus perceived to serve its intended purpose. Some co-researchers labelled this purpose as the *truth* or the meaning of its existence; a purpose that serves the greater good and benefits all. Others talked about truth of purpose by what it is not, such as causing trauma or harmful disruption of that which would otherwise exist in a harmonious and beneficially reciprocal state – a description reserved for some human behaviour.

Maya’s immediate and enthusiastic response to the question of how she would define nature began with a discussion of truth:

How would I define nature? My goodness! All those things that are born purposefully [laughs] that know their *true purpose* [laughing], *rather than um swayed from their original course*... Yes, so that’s what I think about nature, I would say that it’s *the things that are no matter what through time.* I know they evolve but without the um interference of man. That’s what I would think about nature. Nature is yes, the salmon being the salmon, the horse being the horse, or the dog being the dog right so you think of circuses or zoos or stuff like that that’s not necessarily nature, that’s a replication of what – because truly they cannot survive in those environments, ‘cause they’re *artificial,* they’re *not self-sustaining,* that sort of thing. That’s what I would say nature is. It has *its own evolution,* um, and you know what, it *benefits everything,* it *benefits the whole.*

(Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)
Clearly nature was seen as a model for living life with an intrinsically derived purpose which served to benefit others. Thus to be living in a natural way as a human, as a true part of nature, was said to necessitate this kind of behaviour, to be somewhat selfless and live a conscious life, aware of the implications of one’s actions and thus choosing behaviours that benefit all.

Emily – You said nature is things without interference of man, is, are humans part of nature to you?
Maya – Yes, very much so, as long as I would say it’s once again it’s for good of everybody’s well-being, not for a secular, singular purpose or group. … ‘Cause definitely nature does, and when we don’t interfere with our own process too we benefit the whole planet and its well-being…. So yeah I do believe that we’ve lost our way, um a lot of the time, especially with our consumerism and our materialism. So yes we are a part of nature, when we are in harmony with the whole concept of what the world is. (Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

Naomi expanded on this concept of the altruistic outcomes of embodying the truth of being that nature models. She believed that living in harmony with one’s intended purpose and truth resulted in the human expression of innate, naturally benevolent characteristics.

Emily – Do you consider humans a part of nature?
Naomi – Um, I think so, some, more than others, I think the spirit that you carry with you um I would think of it as more nature-oriented than others, warmth, um, compassion those kinds of things. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Thus, co-researchers viewed nature as a model for truth of purpose that results in seamless reciprocity, harmony and benefit for all of nature, including humans. Co-researchers believed that for humans to recognize a personal truth of purpose and to actualize that awareness was to pursue the truth of their personal meaning of life. This perspective of nature as a valued model of truth was not necessarily held prior to their transformative experiences with nature, but has become integrated into their perspective
The development of a comprehensive transportation plan is crucial for addressing urban congestion. This plan should incorporate various strategies, including the expansion of public transportation systems, the implementation of bike lanes, and the encouragement of carpooling. Furthermore, the integration of smart technologies can help optimize traffic flow and reduce pollution. By focusing on these solutions, cities can create a more sustainable and efficient transportation network for their residents.
of the importance of nature to their transformations. Furthermore, this perception of and belief in the truth of nature was often described as standing in rather stark contrast to the lived experience of modern Western society, a discrepancy which contributed to a sense of awakening upon encountering the truth of purpose, ways, and rhythms of nature.

*Inspiring rhythm.* Just as nature provided a model for what it means to live life from a place of personal truth or with an altruistic sense of purpose, co-researchers also expressed the importance of nature in modeling a desirable rhythm and pace of life. Unlike the pace and rhythm of urban life, the pace and rhythm of nature was perceived to be healthier, infused with patience, and embodying the naturalness of growth, creativity and transformation. Co-researchers shared all sorts of stories and metaphors of how nature showed them a different rhythm of life, Adele told stories of watching and being inspired and soothed by the cycles of life of the animal kingdom; Quinn told me about the sense of serenity and profound quiet that overcame him when snorkelling; Naomi told me of the feeling of at once ease and inspiration about life’s possibility while watching the sunrise over Round Lake; and Maya shared these thoughts when I asked her of the importance of nature to her:

Maya – The importance of nature to me, um, oh I could tell you about rhythm, just how it’s helped me to establish my own rhythm....
Emily – How does it, rhythm, you said [nature] helps you establish your own rhythm, how so?
Maya – It creates patience right [laughs], patience is one of my least favourite things [laughing]. And it teaches me that ’cause it takes time. Just like when things happen, you know happen, you can’t force it, what do you get, you don’t get the stability or the strength of that situation or whatever you’re wanting to create. Um, so yeah patience is a big thing and again, change right, [nature] doesn’t stay the same, it has it’s cycles or it’s rhythms that it goes through – seasons, or having not a lot of rain one year or too much rain another year and um, just all of those things.
Emily – Is it like a mirror for you?
Maya – Yeah, yeah I could use it as a mirror. I think that’s one of the things that I’ve started holding onto, sorry connecting to, I take that word back, that I’m connecting to about myself and that re-creating myself ‘cause I can’t be the same, even though sometimes you think you should be but you can never be, and you cannot necessarily be like you were 10 years ago or anything like that right. ‘Cause your life experiences are different, you know, you’ve discovered different pieces of yourself for that puzzle that’s coming into some sense of stability, some form, as opposed to being chaotic, you know it has form and structure that compliments each other now and I become you know, more of a stable foundation as opposed to something that has a lot of spaces and cracks and stuff and not as solid. Yeah that’s all I think I can say on that for now. (Nature Interview with Maya)

The rhythms of nature did not only inspire reflection on the pace and rhythm of co-researchers’ own lives, but it also demonstrated and inspired reflection on the colour, variety, playfulness, and continual renewal within nature. All co-researchers told me of an expanded sense or discovery of their own creative ability. They shared stories of embracing change and evolution in their own sense of self and aspirations. They were opened to the simple joys and opportunities that their everyday life presented. Nature seemed to have provided all co-researchers with an abundance of metaphors or “lessons” (as some described). It also provided an emotionally safe space, grounded in its own truth, which allowed co-researchers to feel open to self (re)discovery and expression within this perceived authentic context.

*Personal Transformation*

Personal transformation was described as a pointed moment of clarity or awareness that had an ongoing and multi-faceted developmental impact, shifting paradigms, realigning one’s sense of self and outlook. This moment of clarity was often described as an “ah-ha” moment; an experience of tuning in to a personal or universal truth that was not recognized prior to that moment. This kind of realization however, did
...
not constitute a transformation unless the perception of change leads to action or behavioural change – an ongoing process of continued insights and growth.

Co-researchers mainly described and defined personal transformation in terms of affected dimensions of self or experiences and perspectives of the self. Naomi gave a list of areas of her self affected by personal transformation: “the main groups I’d say [are]: spiritual, physical, emotional” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi). The impact of personal transformation on these dimensions of self were rarely spoken about in isolation, rather these dimensions of self were more often affected in some combination. Quinn expressed this notion of the interconnecting dimensions in which a person may experience and act on transformation.

Changing one’s self, whether it’s physical, mental or spiritual, to become something that you weren’t previous to that, that changeover, it can be one or all of those thing and I find that one can effect the others…. to fully transform for the better, to make a successful transformation you have to be open and willing to transform all of those things, not just one. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

A shift in any dimension of a person’s conception of their sense of self could have implications in their relationships or outlook on life, or vice versa, although in this study self and outlook seemed to be the dominant dimensions of transformation. The cumulative outcome of changes within the dimensions of self, relationships, and outlook on life were often discussed as being a re-visioning of one’s purpose in life. “Um, so yeah, so that’s what I would say about that,[personal transformation is] about finding my purpose, that whole process of doing that” (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya). Simply identifying a prospect of a purpose was a transformative moment for some but ultimately it is the act of pursuing that purpose in some form that actualizes these new awarenesses.
Active and purposeful engagement. Another important factor in transformation was the actualization of change once a new awareness or perspective had entered a person’s conscious mind. Adele expands on this idea of transformation being more than a moment of realization, it is the implementation of new insights or perspectives: “It’s not like the actual transformation can be instant, but I think to hold onto the transformation and really transform as a person, you have to nurture it” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added). Thus a person’s transformative awareness is translated into behavioural and other changes through a conscious realigning of priorities and making adjustments to one’s life in accordance with said new awareness of self, relationship, or outlook on life.

Co-researchers reported the dual occurrence of epochal and incremental transformation. Personal transformation was often experienced as a single moment of awareness – “ah-ha” – however the resulting changes were more process-oriented and often inspired further reflection, awareness and change. Co-researchers also expressed the idea that transformation is not usually a one-time experience but more of a journey of sequential experiences and awarenesses:

Um, transformation for me is I guess um, it’s a process, it’s not just something that one day happens, it’s um, I don’t think it’s something that really ever ends either, I think it’s something that um, it’s an ongoing thing….. Transformation for me is something that’s really open like it’s almost like an infinite thing [laughs] like you could really, it could go anywhere and it can go for as long as you want it to. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Naomi not only continues to benefit and learn from her transformative experiences well past the event, she understands personal transformation to be an ongoing “… process of finding contentment, calm, peace, and um, those would probably be – spiritualness…”
(Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi). Thus, transformation is a conscious process of active and purposeful engagement with the goal of actualizing a new perspective or awareness that brings calm and a sense of personal congruence.

Openness to change. In their own ways, each co-researcher expressed a degree of discomfort or dissatisfaction with their life circumstances or self prior to the transformation. The unsettledness was discussed as a need for openness to transformation but not necessarily a desire for a specific outcome or change. “I will have to tell you I think I’m seeking it sometimes subconsciously, but not always aware of, but sometimes knowing I need to do this because there is something there for me to understand or to move me to another place” (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya). Although the co-researchers were not necessarily consciously seeking an experience to change their lives, they said that upon looking back, the awareness or changes that they came into were just what they needed.

I think it probably starts with the end result where um for me it was the searching for something which I really didn’t know what it was when I started but that got me to the point where you understand where you need to be, kind of what you need to be doing. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Once they encountered their first transformative experience, they each expressed being more consciously open to change and growth and as Naomi says, “I think once you start seeking, then things, if you’re open to it, things fall into your lap” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi). Just as their transformative journeys began somewhat unexpectedly, their ongoing learning and transformative encounters continue to reveal themselves unexpectedly when they are open to it.
The co-researchers also expressed the belief that personal transformation is possible for all people, however they stated that others would have to find their way to this experience on their own, it is not something that can be forced. Maya simply believes in the inherent good in the world and in all people and that it simply takes a change in perspective to open a person to the opportunities to learn and grow.

...everything has a purpose right, me, my humanness, my um small-mindedness, prevents me from seeing that you know that realistically all energy is neutral, it has the same amount of positive and negative ions and it’s my, it’s what I choose to view it as, if I choose to say there are too many positive or too many negative ions, and it’s me who defines that situation. (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya)

Quinn believed that exposure to nature could have the same impact on others that it had on him. “If you take anyone out there you get in the right um, the right setting and the right amount of time and they’ll come back [to nature] guaranteed. Hmmm. Yeah. [laughs]” (Nature Interview with Quinn).

Retrospectively aware. Not only were co-researchers’ transformative experiences unexpected and unconsciously sought, they were not necessarily aware of the magnitude of the experience until it had passed.

...with this transformative experience with nature so-to-speak it wasn’t until I removed myself from the setting, from nature, and went back to my daily routine, the daily grind that used to be the norm to me but now all of the sudden I felt alienated in my own world so-to-speak, that I realized that I was no longer the person that I used to be...You know it’s hard to pinpoint the exact day that this happened – it wasn’t an exact moment, it was a cumulative amount of time of being in that setting but I remember coming back to [university] to go back to classes and...every single thing seemed so different and so – in certain respects – glaringly wrong... (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele).

This awareness that something had changed, that their outlook or perspective had shifted without full recognition of what had happened was a common experience. This
retrospective awareness of the significance of what they had experienced was often described as entering into their consciousness through incremental retrospective learning and understanding.

So you go through it and you um [laughs] you experience it and then you know, they say the real quest begins after you’ve left and you’re back into the real world and you try to get back in there and so it was, there were little things that I was aware of immediately, but then there were other things that come long after. Like I still feel like I benefit from that experience. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

Thus, from the perspective of co-researchers personal transformation is both an epochal awareness and in incremental implementation of that learning. It is a process of actualizing change, of ongoing and increasing awareness inspired by one or more catalytic encounters that become incorporated into a person’s definition of their life’s purpose and sense of self. Interestingly however, such transformations are only possible when a person is open to learning or changes, often due to some degree of discomfort or dissatisfaction with their current life circumstance or sense of self. And finally transformation culminates in behavioural and conceptual changes in the varying dimensions of a person’s sense of self, their relationships, and outlook on life.

*Individual Depictions of the Essence*

The challenge with this section was to put co-researcher voices at the fore and to quiet my narrative voice, while bringing together their various quotes on different dimensions of the phenomenon ranging from one line to an entire page. Most heuristic studies simply string together block quotes without any other voice present, however those types of studies are only looking at one emotion or experience such as feeling lonely, not the intersection of a cognitive-behavioural experience and the tacit experience of a place.
Thus my compromise was to remain true to the tradition of using large block quotations and occasionally having sequential quoting without any narration but also using narration as a kind of guide through the co-researchers' journeys. Artefacts are imbedded within the individual depictions and were usually accompanied by an especially large quote from the co-researcher explaining its meaning. Some quotes are over a page in length, but I found it necessary to include this as to allow co-researchers' own voices to be heard explaining the symbolic representation of the essence of the phenomenon. Although there is some variability between co-researchers in terms of formatting or ordering their individual depictions, the general approach was to begin with their perspectives on nature, then nature-based leisure and finally their transformative outcomes. The following individual depictions should be read in the spirit of description, not comparison.

*Emily*

It seems that the most effective way for me to share my personal depiction of the essence of personal transformation and nature-based leisure is to lead you through the progression of my experiences. My experiences have been a succession of transformative encounters with nature from various “ah-ha” moments through to the actualization of said awarenesses. My relationship with and perspective on nature have evolved alongside my increasing awareness of self and other. Without a doubt, my transformative experiences with nature began as experiences of dominance and accomplishment and progressed through to experiences of connection and belonging. The interpretation of the relationship I held with my immediate environment at any given point along my journey was indicative of not only my sense of self but also the social
reality that I perceived in other dimensions of my life. The most pertinent experiences of my journey have been: Outward Bound (OB), travelling through New Zealand and Australia, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), Brock University and working at a retreat centre in Northern Ontario.

My intensive foray into nature-based leisure experiences began in 2001 with a 21-day hiking and mountaineering program with Outward Bound (OB). This trip was without a doubt the most important and life changing experience of my life, as a whole, this trip was an “ah-ha” experience that I would struggle to bring into actualization over the years that followed.

I began this OB program as an insecure, depressed, sexually-objectified, superficial, food and body obsessed, 21 year old woman. I was dissatisfied with my self and confused by my place in society. Likewise, my perspective on nature was equally objectified and steeped in a feeling of disassociation, although thinking about nature gave me a sense of hope. OB seemed like an exciting adventure, as well as a promising “empty” space, a clean slate if you will, for me to reconsider myself and to maybe get into the most fantastic shape of my life and thus chase away all of my sadness and confusion. I wrote the following passage the night before my adventure began: “I have a lot to prove to myself and a lot of self-confidence to gain – I know that it won’t all just come to me but I hope this gets me going down the right track.” (Emily’s OB Journal).

Nature was a stage in which I was going to act out my romanticized notions of nature as a blank slate for my own self-obsessed issues and indulgences.

As I progressed through the OB course I found some of my hopes were coming true. By mid-course my self-anxiety had almost melted away, I felt strong, competent,
healthy and engaged. And even though I by no means made friends-for-life on this
course, there was a sense that we were a trusting and (relatively) non-judging community
doing our best to work together with some degree of tolerance for the various loads of
emotional baggage we brought with us. In the physical and social context of this OB
experience, I recognized a unique way of both interacting and also a space in which I
could more clearly understand myself. On day four of the trip I journaled that “People’s
true personalities are starting to shine through more which is both good and bad. I guess
everyone has their faults – I’m sure that things that I do piss people off. It’s just so nice
to be away from everything. I am finding it much easier to come face-to-face with my
emotions and issues in this environment” (Emily’s OB Journal). The heaviness of self
criticism that was my usual companion faded. A new dialogue emerged, a dialogue
centered on self-care and appreciation instead of self criticism:

I am really proud of myself of how well I’m doing out here. The
confidence in myself and others’ confidence in me as a leader makes me
feel fantastic. I am doing things I never thought I’d do and learning more
about myself now than ever! I LOVE how out here working out and
eating are only things you do for survival. I haven’t been feeling
preoccupied with my body or eating at all! So much to think about, some
words to think about: integrity, clarity, flexibility, joy, strength,
compassion, spontaneity, grace, thoughtfulness, light. All of these apply
to me, to life. Love yourself for who you are! (Emily’s OB Journal).

I learned that I am a lot stronger than I thought and that I can rely on
myself. People were talking at dinner about how they are starting to trust
their boots and feet etc. but I said I am having confidence in myself – I
have the tools to do this and anything else – all I have to do is set my mind
to it, follow through, believe in myself…I am feeling stronger and fitter
both emotionally and physically. I couldn’t’ have made a better choice for
myself in choosing Outward Bound. I can do it! (Emily’s OB Journal)

I felt freed from superficial preoccupations of self and instead was more interested
in living in the moment and getting the most out of every minute, including, day-time
skinny dipping in glacier lakes, rising extra early to catch the sunrise, trying new skills with less worry than usual about not being perfect. I couldn’t identify what was different but I simply felt good, I felt happy and proud of myself and most importantly I felt free. I also felt “raw”; I expressed this in a letter I wrote to myself:

There’s no hiding from myself out here. All the self-doubt and worry that I have comes oozing out at the most inopportune moments, but I guess it’s a good thing ‘cause out here it seems ridiculous and I can see that now. But it makes me feel raw, it’s really hard listening to myself and feeling like it’s not even me talking, like it’s this mean voice that isn’t even mine but I don’t know how it got in me. (Letter to myself from Outward Bound, Emily)

I began to be aware of the difference of a self that was separate from the pained self. On my first night of a three-day solo, I wrote, “it’s a half hour till sundown I don’t know why I’m nervous, I guess I’m afraid of being alone with myself, with my thoughts” (Emily’s OB Journal).

Nature was the backdrop to these confrontations with myself. I saw nature as a spectacular empty space in which I could reinvent myself as a strong, competent and happy individual. I felt free from the social norms of what a woman my age should look like, be interested in, the things I should desire to consume, and the lifestyle that I should aim for. I was free from the expectations and perspectives that friends and family had of me. I could be me on whatever terms I wanted, there was no one there to tell me that I was doing something that they didn’t think was interesting, worthwhile or within my capabilities. I felt much more able to understand myself and my feelings during my OB trip, yet was aware that a very different reality faced me beyond the trip. I was aware of a disconnection between the self and social context I experienced in nature versus what I would face back in Ontario and considering that difference made me feel daunted.
It’s really nice to understand why I feel the way I do. But it’s also very frustrating too because there is no clear path to healing my wounds and issues. Perhaps the first step is to try to be continually aware of my actions and to be conscious of why I am behaving a certain way at a given time. I need to be proactive in ensuring that I live a happy and successful life beyond this trip. I need to branch out, make new friends, start new hobbies and activities, take school seriously, and have LOTS OF FUN! I am the only one that will always be there for me thus I must start taking responsibility for my feelings. (Emily’s OB Journal)

Although I was in awe of the beautiful Pacific Coast Mountains and developed a certain feeling of comfort out there, I certainly did not have any profound moments of thinking of myself as intimately interconnected with the entire ecosystem of nature. The way I experienced my self and social context during OB seemed like a daunting task to “take home”, especially because of the disconnection I felt. Nature was separate from my day to day life and thus the way I experienced myself in nature was separate from the self I knew in the city. It would take me years to bridge that gap.

This picture nicely sums up my Outward Bound experience it’s a fairly typical photo – the brave student on a first peak ascent, proud, looking free and in awe. There’s no doubt it’s somewhat of a cliché, but it’s exactly how I felt. I felt opened to a world of possibilities I had never considered before and more aware of myself and infused with a desire to continue on that path of self discovery. However, actually stepping into the possibilities of my self beyond the backcountry would take years to accomplish. To this day, mountain terrain like this brings be back to that feeling of being amazed by and opened to the beauty and possibility of life; today however I also feel a deep sense of connection.
I returned from Outward Bound full of life and enthusiasm determined to keep up my involvement with nature; this however rapidly faded away. The urban environment and university life was more than I could resist. Those “transferable” skills and experiences so often talked about in outdoor recreation literature were ultimately ineffectively “transferred”. My free and empowered sense of self slipped away, a memory much like the mountains of British Columbia. As that feeling faded, I became increasingly aware of the discrepancy of the person I experienced at Outward Bound and the person I experienced in the city. Three days after my return from OB, I journaled “I feel as though I’ve changed so much yet I know that’s not really true, I just understand myself better (I hope!!) I need to start acting on my intentions of taking care of myself” (Emily’s OB Journal). I go on to make a list of physical things I need to do and foods I should eat, clearly unable to translate the experience back to city living. I foolishly thought that my feelings had more to do with the physical involvement, of feeling fit and healthy (within nature), apparently unable or not ready to face the real demons of perceived expectations and superficial fixations that were plaguing me. For although I had deeply appreciated the beauty of nature, I had not made the link as to how that space provided such an experience – I would not figure that out for years, although I would
actively search for it, returning to nature to re-connect with that free sense of self again and again.

Ever since I returned from Outward Bound, I had been planning and scheming, trying to find ways to get back into that similar mind-space and physical setting. Three years later, once I finished university I literally landed in New Zealand. I spent four months in the backcountry of New Zealand and two months bouncing between the front and backcountry of Australia.

My time in these two countries brought me to a place of intense realization that I was a happier, more centered, and authentic person in the backcountry. The slower pace of life, meaning, beauty, and lack of superficial preoccupations that I experienced everyday in the backcountry brought me to a heightened awareness of my self. It was simply nature in all it’s glory and brutality, there were no distractions, and no excuses, and I faced myself everyday and grew to accept that person. I felt free to be me, whoever that was and to let go of everything else in the backcountry. In between hikes I would occasionally find myself in a hostel or on a bus with other people my age who were doing the booze/bus tours of these two magnificent countries. I felt different, I didn’t care about pub-hopping or bungee jumping and quite frankly they seemed like inauthentic and superfluous ways to experience these countries. From my perspective, the “real” way to get to know Australia and New Zealand was through knowing the land. My feelings were validated by the community of like minded travellers and locals who I met on my hikes. I valued the evenings huddled around woodstoves in backcountry huts talking about spirituality, environmental ethics, politics, or simply the astounding beauty of that day’s hike. I was inspired by the couple in their late 70’s doing an 80 kilometre hike or
the girls of eight and ten years old with their dad on a four day adventure. It wasn’t all joyous either, I also met a mountain climber who only 2 days earlier had been on a tragic failed ascent of Mount Cook that took the life of his best friend. Regardless of whether my encounters in the backcountry were joyful, inspiring or deeply saddening, they felt “real”, I felt real – a feeling that usually eluded me in the cities.

In contrast to Outward Bound, I found myself better able to maintain the feeling I had in the backcountry, I was conscious of a stronger identification with and relationship to the backcountry of New Zealand and Australia than the frontcountry. When I was in a city I had only hiking clothes and shoes, I had budgeted for simple food and travel (my thumb) and I was gloriously happy living that simple lifestyle. It was unbelievably liberating to live a non-materialistic lifestyle, to be Emily free of pretence or masks. Although it could be said that I was simply adopting one stereotype for another, that’s not how it felt, it was a true recognition that this is who I was, this is what I valued and these were the ways of engaging with life that were most meaningful to me. All I truly cared about was taking in the backcountry scenery and enjoying the interesting characters along the way. Unlike OB where I went from simplicity back to my usual routine and social network, in New Zealand and Australia, I consciously chose to maintain the things that fostered the good feelings I had in the backcountry.

I felt joyful, independent, adventurous, competent, capable and authentic. The pace of life felt right, my body felt strong and my mind free of fear and self doubt. I enthusiastically moved from track to track excited by the natural wonders I was bound to see and although I was admittedly taking notes of peaks climbed and kilometres hiked, that preoccupation faded quickly and quiet moments of appreciation became the most
important. I would get up especially early to make sure I was alone on the trails, and I often took longer than usual to get from point A to point B because I would take so much time to just sit and appreciate an especially beautiful or peaceful place. One such example was in Tongariro National Park, one of the busiest hiking areas in New Zealand and a must-see of spectacular volcanic terrain. The picture below captures the three or four hours I spent just sitting atop Mt. Ngauruhoe, looking across at Blue Lake and Lake Taupo in the distance. My hiking partner and I spent an extra day in the park just to be able to appreciate being there. When I look at this picture, I think of how at home I felt both in the place and in myself, I felt connected and as though that was exactly where I belonged. I had been in New Zealand for three and a half months at this point and was nearing the end of my time there. I remember thinking about what I had seen and done and how it no longer felt like an accomplishment but simply a natural way for me to be. I felt like I belonged in nature, that I was my best and truest self out there and that I needed to align the rest of my life with that belief.
I developed a true love of the backcountry of New Zealand especially. I actually panicked when it was time to go to Australia, I’d heard so many stories of Australia being a non-stop party, something that I no longer valued or desired. I was very aware of my sense of belonging in the backcountry and when my travels through Australia became an unfortunate race around the country, I began to feel disassociated again, I felt lost amongst the consumption of the tourist experience. Yet again, the grounded sense of self, the peacefulness and harmony I felt with the world and myself slipped away until I found myself back in Ottawa and wondering yet again, why, where and when I had lost all those good feelings. Just before I left Australia I journaled about my anxiety of returning to Canada:

Well here it is, Me and my self facing my future and my past. I need to start living by my own standards, I know now what I expect of myself so it’s time I start living up to my own standards. I do not want this life that I have been raised in. I want adventure, nature, a simple and fulfilling lifestyle. I want a job which keeps me outdoors, active and helping people. I want to be surrounded by people who share my values and who appreciate the true value of nature. I want to feel like me all the time and to contribute to other people feeling supported to express and discover their own self and abilities.

Two things I was certain of following this trip were that first, I was going to find that feeling again and hold onto it and secondly that I wanted to be involved in giving others the chance to (re)discover themselves in the backcountry.

The following winter I began a three month Outdoor Educator Semester with the National Outdoor Leadership School. I was with 14 other like-minded individuals who also aspired to work in the outdoor industry. In this social setting, my identification as an “outdoors person” was strengthened, and as such the true sense of self that I felt was given some sort of tangible definition, but certainly did not capture it’s full essence. I
Nature and Personal Transformation

once again had those feelings of competence, ability, freedom, appreciation of beauty and simplicity and identification with a real self.

I came to a deep sense of connection and comfort in the areas where we honed our outdoor leadership skills. Twenty-seven days canyoneering in the Dirty Devil Canyon region of South East Utah, seventeen days backcountry skiing south of the Tetons in Wyoming and twenty-four days rock climbing at Split Rock and Sink’s Canyon brought me to a sense of being at home in each of these areas. I felt both at home in my surroundings and at home in the person that I was in those places. I began to very consciously question who I was in the backcountry, what my values were, what I liked so much about myself and what made those feelings possible. I thought about the social and physical environment and about how I interacted with those contexts. I did not come to any grand conclusions except that there was more to understand and that in nature, unlike any other places, I felt most like myself.

Once again however, upon arrival home to Canada I was torn by the two incongruent lifestyles and ways of being that I experienced. Somehow I got swept up in city life each time I returned from these long stays in the backcountry. Each time I returned (OB, travelling and NOLS) however, I was more and more aware of the differences in my experience of self, of my environment and the perceived social values systems that influenced my ways of being. With each experience I was able to bring a little more of that home, more self-confidence, strengthened environmental ethics and so on. When I arrived at Brock I began to read about concepts of “transference”, studies on women’s empowerment and gender-bending through outdoor experiences. I found myself again and again finding my own experiences in the literature and yet not finding
an answer to why I felt most like myself out there or how to maintain it in the frontcountry. I remember saying to Dr. Colleen Hood and Dr. Erin Sharpe that I couldn’t quite explain what I felt in the backcountry except to say that I felt most like myself and that is what I wanted to study.

This past summer after completing my interviews for this research project I found myself involved in co-leading back-to-back trips, a Shamanic vision quest and a trip for at-risk girls. With co-researchers’ voices in the back of my head and trip participants’ experiences unfolding before my eyes I finally understood my self within nature:

Watching the impact of nature on the people around me is truly amazing. A few women have been talking about how they feel all of their “disguises and masks” are useless and unavailable out here and so they feel they must step into their real self – but don’t really know who that is, or how to access “her”. It’s like watching my Outward Bound experience unfold in third-person.

I feel very much myself out here. I feel competent and caring, more aware and in-tune, in harmony with the world and with myself. I feel I am both gentler and more real – less whining, fear and self-doubt. Nature is at once totally accepting of me, the real me, the uninhibited, adventurous and aware person – and totally unforgiving of mindlessness, lack of self and other awareness. It is a place and space that demands I tune-in, be mindful of self, other and environment and it is also a friendly, welcoming, accepting place to experience my self – perhaps because nature “is what it is” and thus models acceptance that we are who we are.

Somehow when I’m out here, I feel more beautiful, more complete and more at peace with all that is in me, others and all around. When I’m here, everything including me is quite obviously just as they should be. (Emily’s Journal, Summer 2007)
Looking at the picture above I remember hiking alone in unpredictable weather and feeling very uncertain about my decision to go alone and to take the route I was on. Just as I was about to turn back down the mountain, the sun broke through the clouds and shone right to me in the thick of the forest. I felt encouraged to continue to follow my path and be hopeful for the ridgeline walk ahead of me. When I look this picture I am reminded of how nature has served a central role in inspiring, motivating and allowing me to move towards a truth of self and way of being. Today I see myself as an unfolding being who learns and grows with each life experience but who is grounded in a truth of self that emanates most purely in relation to/with nature.
Adele

The first thing Adele tells me about her understanding and experience of personal transformation and nature-based leisure is that, "...well, it's difficult to put into words..." (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele). As we move through our conversations however, she finds the words to describe how nature-based experiences have played a pivotal role in transforming her sense of self and outlook on life. Adele’s first artefact includes two pictures, and the first of two pictures captures not only the physical setting of her transformative experiences but it is also a literal snapshot of her “before” perspective and sense of self: more superficially-oriented, unquestioning and detached.

This is like a lake with trees and ... you go through here and the wildlife station is over here and this is the end and this is the lake and it's like the physical manifestation of nature and what I saw before like this is what I would see when I went camping with friends and when I went canoeing and when I first arrived there... for most people [picture 1] is all they see for people who haven't gone through a transformation... Like you know so many people don't get what is hovering around them... (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)
During her time at the wilderness research station Adele’s appreciation for nature evolved and complexified. In scientific terms she came to a much more profound appreciation of the human interconnection with nature and in philosophical terms she began to recognize nature as a source of truth, an unfettered space or collective entity which is only primitively understood. She moved into a space of deep connection and conscious awareness of how the earth and all of nature provides for her and how she in turn should shape her behaviour and life to give back.

I don’t know if I want to say that I have a more intimate relationship with nature, but I definitely have put my relationship that I have with nature at the forefront of things...my relationship with nature in terms of like “Mother Nature” if you want to use that term, I just have, I wouldn’t call myself a religious person and even a spiritual person is kind of on the cusp of not really but it’s more like I see that as being like The Being that we should all respect and we all should you know, pay homage to so-to-speak...we need to take a step back and realize what the real important things are in terms of our survival and our well being ...I respect the earth I you know want to contribute to it um and I feel like I give to the earth and the earth gives back to me, whether it be a spiritual level or a physical level and I feel fortunate that I have gone through that and that I am aware of that. (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Witnessing the natural rhythms and ways of nature were an important part of her transformative experience. Adele describes the transformative intersection of nature in terms of being drawn back into nature. For once she was drawn back in, watching animals come and go, sunsets and sunrises, she slowly became to identify herself more intimately with that process, the rhythm and with the interconnection.

Adele - I can’t really pinpoint exactly where my transformative experience happened I think it was more of a cumulative thing over a few, like it started to happen watching that first sunset or something and then it may have been when I was paddling out there by myself, like I used to love going for early morning paddles at like 4am when the sun was starting to rise and ‘cause that’s when you’d really see all the animals out and the physical things going on and you know and I just loved watching the
transition from night to day and all the nocturnal animals leaving and all of the day animals coming and stuff .... I couldn’t really just like [transform] in one little thing, I couldn’t just pick one location or just one thing ‘cause my transformative experience happened in nature, like nature isn’t just one spot for it’s like the whole thing, so like it wasn’t necessarily just there that it happened but it’s just one of the spots that I could go to and be like “wow” you know, like listening to the spring peepers in the spring and just like you know being drawn back into nature. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

When Adele was paddling across a quiet lake, basking in the sun on an isolated beach or simply sitting and enjoying the serenity of witnessing nature all around her she tells me she feels liberated. This is not an exuberant liberation, but as she calls it, more of a “Zen-like state” of oneness and belonging. “Yeah I guess it’s really hard to use one word to explain it, I guess it’s just this overall sense of self and of who you are and where you are and a sense of belonging; like you know how you fit into the world, into the whole system, into the whole ecosystem” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added). It is this very awareness of belongingness and connection to all of nature that held a key dimension to her transformation.

I think it’s just an innate need to be a part of nature and a lot of people don’t realize it and I didn’t realize that until I was thrown into it and then I was like “oh, alright, this is where I feel like me, this is where I feel like you know, a human being that is supposed to be on this Earth,” not you know Adele who lives in [Ontario], that is biologist that does this, that and the other thing. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

When Adele began her time up North, she thought she knew her self very well, and she did, but only in relation to others. She came to discover that “I was a pawn of society...” (Nature Interview with Adele). Her newfound sense of belonging and connectedness within a context of perceived truth and naturalness allowed her to realize how many external factors were influencing her definition and perception of herself.
...we’re bombarded by ads on TV, by billboards on the street and if you don’t have the chance to remove yourself from all of that whether it be for a day or for an hour or [laughs] four months then I don’t think you get to really fully understand who you are as an individual and you’re always kind of moulding yourself into your friends and who’s around you and I think that was a big thing for me, I think I finally realized who I was. (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

She began to experience and understand herself as a self beyond the familiar social role expectations or externally influenced self perceptions. “It’s kind of put my whole life goals more into perspective, for Me the person, not for me the daughter or the girlfriend or the student but it’s about what I want to do” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele). “Yeah, it’s more of a coming from within, it’s more of my True person coming out so-to-speak it’s almost like nature gave me the ability to identify who I was and to become that person” (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added). She tells me that this “True person” is an instinctual one, for as she views it, her true self is one that she experiences in those moments of intense awareness of her interconnection to all of nature.

I think that almost was the sense I got like it was more of my animal instinct working with nature in that respect, it was more like me giving myself a chance to be an animal where you can just sit and become one with nature like become one with this whole eco-system....undergoing that initial intense like transformation that “I am a part of this whole crazy thing we call nature” you know ... that’s something you go through like learning how to walk or learning how to talk, you just learn how to, it was more like regaining my instincts kind of to become part of nature and I think that once you get that, this whole thing is like learning how to ride a bike, you know once you learn how to be that, once you’re back in touch with that natural self, I think it’s always kind of there and it’s more like that we’re, you’re back in that situation. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

This experience of and identification with an instinctual, real self is the foundation of all changes in her sense of self, relationships and outlook on life. It’s as if nature is her touchstone, bringing her to a place of intense awareness, grounding her in all that she is
and all that she is a part of, she tells me, "... nature does nurture and it just brings these things out in you and you can’t stop it and it's exciting I don’t know and I just feel so passionate about it like I want everyone to be able to go through this..." (Nature Interview with Adele). She goes on to share a wonderful in-depth account of how this phenomenon comes together for her.

Well there’s just the general beauty of nature that draws you in I think. Anyone with any sort of respect for our Earth can see that. And it think that’s how it started, you know I just was in this beautiful setting and I acknowledged that and I was like “wow this is really neat” and it wasn’t until I allowed myself to just sit down for more than 5 minutes at a time and you know put the day behind me .... it wasn’t until I chose not to do, I chose to end my work for the day, or I chose not to do work for the day and I’d just go out there with a clear mind knowing “ok I’m just going to go out and see what I see” and that’s when I was more apt to you know just feeling this complete sense of like humbleness around my surroundings and appreciating like the complexity of the physical beauty but also the unseen connection between everything that surrounds us and then that’s when I started to feel like myself as a part of that you know like I was sitting on this lake and it was just kind of coming back to this idea of humans as part of this intricate system that we’re in. Like we’re sitting alone on a rock beside a lake or you know on a rock overlooking a valley or something like that and you think you’re not part of nature and you’re just completely surrounded by nature and then you’ll hear like a little squirrel come up behind you or you know you’ll move and it’ll jump and you know just in that little instinct [unclear]. Or you know you’ll be out walking or I’ll be out walking to another lake on a portage or going on a hike and you’ll hear a moose in the woods – and that heightened awareness it was more like I put all the anxieties behind me and I was just aware of my surroundings and confident with my innate human abilities to survive [laughs] and know what I was doing and um the whole transformation thing, like it started to occur once I could just remove myself from work and from the people. And then once I got that first kind of taste of “wow this is awesome” you know whether it was watching the sunset, and I think that because I was up there for so long I can’t remember the exact moment that it happened ‘cause it was a wild ride while we were up there. It was most likely while I was watching the sunset over the swim rock [unclear]...sometimes a couple of us would go you know and we’d just sit there and wouldn’t say anything we’d just float in the lake at night watching the sky. I remember one night my friend and I paddled to the middle of the lake in canoes and just we just floated in the middle of the lake and we just watched the shooting stars until 3 in the
morning and it was just so neat and it was just one of those things that we by ourselves chose to go out in canoes and go drifting down the dam [laughs]. It was so neat, it was completely relaxing and we just felt, and well I shouldn’t say we, I felt totally at one with what was going on like I didn’t feel like I was invading, I think that was a big part of the transformation was feeling that I belonged where I did …. It was hilarious when these people came up. I remember when these friends of ours came up and they rolled up in their you know pimpin’ Honda Accord with like dance music playing and I mean like when you’re out there and you’re in nature we’re listening to like Neil Young and Leonard Cohen and [laughing] and I mean you know you just get into this rhythm of playing the guitar by the fire and then these guys show up with laptop that they have out by the fire and occasionally, like say every weekend somebody would have friends up but it was like this constant reminder to us …like wow, you know and that’s when our friends really started to make, well not make fun of us but just be like “oh you crazy hippies” you know [laughing] but I’m not a hippie I’m just aware of where I am and what’s going on around me. And ya it was funny but ya, this whole transformative thing – back to the question – I think once I found where I stood in that place, like when I gave myself the chance to just stand there by myself and it’s not like I was like “ok now I’m going to have a transformative experience” I just happened to find myself on my own and it just kind of happened I don’t know if it was just the deafening silence of not having other people around and being able to hear the fish come up to the surface of the water and the wind blow through the white pines and everything around me and hear my own heart beat kind of, you know what I mean, you know that kind of idea, that kind of drew me in and after that happened a couple of times I found that really easy to return to that whole transformative experience like for me now you know I can go walk out in the woods here if I’d had a stressful day and just stand there and take a deep breath and find that place again, just find myself in this physical, non-physical nature around us. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Canoeing, star-gazing, hiking and exploring or just taking in a beautiful setting are all examples of the types of leisure experiences Adele enjoys. She told me that these experiences were more purposeful and meaningful, a contrast to her non-nature leisure experiences which she described as monotonous and as serving as more of a distraction.

I think of [leisure] things in non-nature, were more of just a shift of focus where I didn’t have to … you know an assignment to do or anything like that. It’s just kind of that I went to do what I was good at and I just did it and it was a monotonous thing so-to-speak [unclear], just like bouncing off
walls of a pool and it just to remove me from that, just a social time with friends like that will remove you from it but I find it’s not the same, like I think it’s last time that I said that “nature just lets you be you around yourself” whereas like swimming would remove me from the like the crazy like structures of life and put me around the wild, crazy, fun people in life that kind of just take your mind off of things [unclear] but it’s not taking you to the same state of mind that nature would. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

She tells me her nature-based leisure experiences provided her with a feeling all at once of being calm, engaged, aware, stress-free, in-the-moment and clear of mind.

Furthermore, the engagements were personally meaningful and the physicality served a valued purpose.

It’s a sense of accomplishment, it’s just a sense of happiness and peacefulness that comes with that, that comes with any sort of nature-based leisure and it’s a moment for me to sort of regroup with myself….. But it’s a very emotional, but not emotional like sad, or overly bubbly, jubilant emotion, it’s just kind of that calm sense that we talked about that last time, it’s that, it gets your endorphins flowing but more in that calm sense. It just kind of brings me back down to where I should be and it um just lets me kind of forget, not forget but replace all of those negative stressed out thoughts that are running, you know the things that are constantly running through your mind … and you can just kind of erase that and I don’t know what it is about nature and I don’t know if everybody is capable of doing that but if I get out on a boat in the middle of a lake I’m like “I’m awesome” you know and I’m out in the middle of a lake so I’m like “I can’t do any of those things right now” it’s just like you know “I will enjoy what’s around me”. And I think for me I have such an interest in nature that it captivates me it just draws me in kind of and I’m there, I’m just you know overwhelmed by it. It’s kind of an overwhelming feeling but not an overwhelming feeling like “oh my god like I can’t handle it” it’s like a calming overwhelming kind of sense. Emily – In the last interview you kept talking about calmness plus heightened awareness, almost coming together? Adele – Right, and it’s not like calmness in a meditative state like lying there. It’s calms like not, like mentally calm, not so much physically calm ‘cause sometimes I’m like “oh lets run up that mountain” but it’s more like mentally calm like I’m no longer stressed out about the, [pause] not the unimportant things in life ‘cause that’s the life we’ve put ourselves in and they might be important in certain aspects but it removes me from the whole non-nature based side of existence that I um, you know to do with the life we have regardless of where we are and what we do it kind of
removes me from that and calms my thoughts I guess you could say. Well yeah I become consumed by this wonderful environment wherever I might be. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Adele’s new sense of self emanates from within, awakened by a deep sense of connection to all of nature. Her belief in the innate truth of nature, of the importance of honouring our interconnection with nature and her shifted perspective of her situatedness in this world has led to changes in her sense of self, relationships with others, and outlook on life. She is no longer unconsciously moving through her life and living in reaction to perceived expectations, she is more critical and conscious of how she not only interacts with the world, but how she is continually constructing her understanding of it. The second photo of her artefact, a photo taken just moments after the first photo is a symbolic representation of these changes:

... after the whole transformation you tend to see nature in a totally different view and see yourself and everything around you differently and that’s kind of why I took this picture ‘cause I happened to be floating around in a canoe that day and I just saw this reflection of the shoreline
here in the water and I was like “wow, that’s incredible” and I just thought it was a really creative picture but at the same time it totally fits into what we’ve been talking about and it kind of falls into this whole thing about what you see, what you perceive to be reality isn’t really reality, like there’s a whole other side to what exists and I just find that this particular area of nature like this wildlife station will always have a spot in my heart ‘cause like I can always go and understand you know, I have just such a deep understanding of everything, from the biologic to the actual personal aspects of where I belong in nature and that’s why I picked these … like [picture 2] is the exact same thing, same place, same time [as picture 1] but it’s just this totally different perspective on it and after my transformation I tended to see more, more upside down, more, look at it from a totally different angle than from before. (Nature Interview with Adele)

Before the transformation Adele was an average city girl with a fairly average North American lifestyle of materialism and consumption. She always had an environmental awareness, but after her transformation she desired to live closer to the natural world, both physically and in terms of being conscious of how her lifestyle and consumer choices could disrupt nature’s health and rhythm. These changes are based on her realigned perspective of how she fits into the world and of nature’s centrality to this understanding:

…getting back in touch with your raw human side, like who you are and why you’re, how you fit into the whole like bio-complexity of this world that we live in… understanding how I am part of you know, the ecosystem and I have a role to play but at the same time how I’m interacting with society. Where a lot of people have religion and stuff, people need something you know something to worship something to go towards but to me it’s not so much worshiping something, it’s not so much you know idolizing something, it’s more just embracing the actual like power that is, the actual like reality of you know we’re living in this living, breathing organism of the Earth that’s in the universe and everything influences everything else… (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Adele’s nature-centered perspective centres her priorities and shapes her lifestyle. She opts for fair trade products, natural fibres and is very aware of the impact of her lifestyle on the ecosystem. She also now embraces following her passion and does not
null
worry about status, material gain or what her peers and family thinks of her choices, she is now able to critically engage with her life and finds herself more aware and purposeful in understanding her path and choices.

...you know everyone is always questioning what I’m doing now but now I have more of an understanding about this is what I do and this is why I do it, like being able to answer people – “why I do it” – it’s important to understand that, like to understand why you really feel the way you do about things, it’s not like “oh I’ve never thought about it” [unclear] you know not like, “oh ‘cause it’s practical”. To be able to actually answer the “whys” of life is important... I’ve been able to clear my mind of all the garbage that’s been put there and it made me take a step back and really reassess, not at that moment but in time, in parts... like “why I’m living my life the way I am, and is this the way I want to live my life?” (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

She stepped into a calm sense of confidence in this independent sense of self that is grounded in nature, she say’s quite simply “It made me Me!” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele). Her sense of self is grounded in and guided by her knowledge of her place within the larger scope of nature. She lives much more consciously, aware of the influences of society around her and able to return to nature to reground herself in her values and true way of being. This shift has improved her well-being, allowing her to maintain a calmer and more grounded feeling:

I think that I’m a much healthier person emotionally and mentally so-to-speak.... So it’s helped me approach a situation at a slower pace I guess it’s helped me to not be the flighty person that’s in there vibrating at a really high level. It’s kind of like taught me to approach them at a slower pace but also to think things through and to think about what I’m doing and to always relate back to my self whenever I’m in a situation or when something’s happening. Like what do I want to happen? What do I, my self, want to happen not me as a biologist but me my self as a person. (Personal Transformation interview with Adele)

Adele’s sense of confidence, internally defined of self, and aptitude for self-questioning and discovery led her to a newfound sense of creativity. The creativity was
opened up by her redefinition of self became a more generalized sense of creativity that she has begun to explore in other aspects of her life. She believes that this creativity is a natural human trait:

...there’s always that creative aspect that humans have had and I think that it’s just in our innate being and I think that in being in that natural setting really brings out that certain aspect of creativity. I don’t mean the creativity to paint a giant mural that’s going to hang in the Guggenheim or anything but it’s more the creativity of expressing who you are, and everyone has a different sense of creativity and I think it’s just in all honesty it’s that whole foundation of being confident with yourself and it’s allowing yourself to “bubble over” you know, this is who I am and this is the way I am...Yeah yeah ‘cause it’s like I realized that, who I am, and where I am in nature and like what am I really capable of, not being held down by all of societies demands and stuff. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

This creative discovery of self opens up an even wider range of possibilities for Adele in defining herself, her abilities and her ways of expressing herself and relating to the world. Through all of this change though, Adele still feels she’s the same person, but a more grounded version, one that emanates from within and feels like her real, true self.

I’m still that person that happy, optimistic person that likes to keep people happy but now I’m like that but with a much much greater twist.... I feel more myself than I was before like I’m no longer the girl who’s running around trying to keep everyone happy, just to keep everyone happy. And I know a lot of people are like my [friend] who wears these different masks of who she is...but I think I do have a constant - well not aura - but I do have a constant like way about me that no matter which hat I’m wearing I still have the same face on. Like I’m still me, this is my integrity to myself and to nature and to like things that I stand for and nature is a priority of mine. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Adele’s newfound confidence, grounded sense of self and expanded feeling of connection to nature and all beings translated indirectly into shifts in her relationships with others.

What comes to Adele’s mind first when we talk about how her relationships have been affected is how people react to her. She’s been teased about being a “hippie” — a
stereotype she’d prefer not to be associated with – as old friends struggle to understand her new life philosophies. Friends and family also remark on her calm and cool demeanour. Adele notices differences as well, like friends’ materialistic lifestyles or family members whose lives swirl with drama and insecurity. The results have been that “…friendships that were real were strengthened, and the friendships that were a façade kind of drifted to the wayside” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele). She finds herself both more consciously particular in terms of shared values and outlook when selecting who to associate with but she is also more understanding and patient of those with whom she does not have a shared perspective.

Nature is Adele’s touchtone; she sees it as the truth of the interconnection of all of life, and as a place where she can (re)discover her true sense of self through a deep sense of connection to all of life. She feels calmly confident to express and explore herself while realigning her priorities towards a more conscious lifestyle grounded in her profound valuing of nature.

Maya

Maya’s transformation center’s on her perspective that “Nature is my truth” (Nature Interview with Maya). Nature is truth in its purpose, evolution, manifestation and relationships. These beliefs now guide and centre Maya in her sense of self, relationships and outlook on life.

In nature, she feels free from the expectations of others, the roles she is supposed to fill and the cultural norms that she is judged against. Nature is a place where she feels free of those bounding and potentially oppressive pressures. To Maya, nature is a context of non-judgement and experienced as a time of peacefulness. “[Nature’s] authentic, it’s
um, it doesn’t judge me, it doesn’t put conditions on me” (Nature Interview with Maya).

In nature she feels free to be herself without judgment or expectation, she feels deeply connected to and supported by nature, it is a space without conditions or false external influences, “it’s finding that truth and oneness with everything without having a lot of other peoples’ ideas and illusions attached to that” (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya). “I’d say it’s my place of oneness; it’s a place of, of completeness, wholeness, not being defined by anything or anybody” (Nature Interview with Maya).

Nature is a space where Maya can simply be and where she feels a reciprocal relationship of peaceful acceptance.

Emily – Nature is unassuming of you?
Maya – Yes, it’s just like you know you can be here and it’s not asking anything of you or you asking anything of it, it’s just you’re here. it’s just so unassuming it’s just part of what I enjoy, it’s just so peaceful. (Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

This unassuming lived-space allows Maya to consider and explore the truth of her self, she says that the feeling of wholeness she has in nature is her true self.

Nature as space models a harmonious life rhythm, and provides learning and insight through naturally occurring lessons and metaphors.

Maya - ...it’s like a huge um, classroom [laughs].
Emily – Oh nature as a classroom?
Maya – Yes, very much so. It has so much to teach me, ‘cause you know like I said it’s, it has all the tools [rhythms/metaphors] and it’s for me to recognize that ‘cause they’re all sitting right there and it’s about awareness right. So it’s given me all of that to understand. (Nature Interview with Maya)

Maya values her ability to explore and make meaning of nature’s metaphor. She tells me about how she’s learned from nature about rhythms. “The importance of nature to me, um, oh I could tell you about rhythm, just how it’s helped me to establish my own
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rhythm” (Nature Interview with Maya). She speaks of the pace of things growing and how that reminds her to not rush her own growth and healing, and to be patient with herself and others. She identifies with the graceful changing of the seasons, of the way she changes as a natural progression of life. Nature inspires Maya, she feels safe to explore the truth of herself while witnessing and enjoying the truth of her environment. The lessons of truth and purpose that nature has modeled are central to her transformation and evolving discovery of self.

Maya has a sense of well-being when she’s in nature that she doesn’t feel elsewhere, it’s a unique combination of feelings that ground her, quiet her mind and invigorate her body and soul. Whether she is riding her horse, going for a hike or on a Shamanic vision quest, any effort or energy she puts into any nature-based experiences always come back to her, rejuvenating her. The feelings and state-of-mind that she encounters during nature-based leisure stand in contrast to her everyday life experience.

Hmmm, [nature] gives me joy, it makes me feel good inside, it nourishes me…. it makes me slow down and just like “okay” and be very very present. To really appreciate it here and now and it gives me a real sense of well-being, ya a sense of well-being. And it feels like a mutual relationship…it makes me feel good. It fills me with, vitality maybe, with life, it fills me with the feel good stuff, I just feel good. You don’t feel like it’s been a long day at work where you’re just spending one type of energy like your mental energy or something like that, so you feel tired from that, you don’t feel tired, or if you do feel tired it’s from the physical exercise it’s a good feeling like a, um, ya the only thing that comes up is well-being. (Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

The good feelings she experiences in nature go even further. For much of Maya’s life she felt very timid and described seeing boundaries instead of possibilities, feeling scared and unsure to move beyond her comfort zone, beyond what was known and acceptable to the people of her community and family. Her nature-based leisure
experiences helped her to overcome those fears and perceived limitations. Within the
perceived safety and truth of nature and the unique opportunities of leisure Maya began
to push her limits and explore and experience new dimensions of her self.

I went up [North] to [Lion] Mountain, that was the first time I’d ever
really been away from my home or my husband and established myself
away from him and going on to do a vision quest and me being afraid of
the dark all that sort of stuff. (Personal Transformation Interview with
Maya)

And with each consecutive experience, her sense of self and possibility expanded,
“...stretching my boundaries, see how far I can go, this little girl from [small town
Ontario], in her small little community, and realizing once again that yes, if you set your
mind to it Maya you can do whatever you want” (Personal Transformation Interview with
Maya). Through her many and varied transformative experiences in nature Maya’s life
has been significantly changed. Her priorities and purpose of life now centre on a sense
of connection with nature, her sense of self has been at once expanded and fortified and
her approach to relationships has become more accepting and gentle.

Maya has found her home and personal Truth in nature. Her life is modeled
around the rhythms of nature, the lessons of patience, interconnection and harmony. She
has come to a place of gratitude and love for her life, acceptance of herself and
authenticity in her relationships. Her sense of self and her capabilities have expanded
beyond her dreams and in that expansion her youthful wonderings of what the universe
held for her have begun to be discovered. She is connected to all, she is in God’s
perfection, a perfection embodied by nature and in living with that truth she is living her
purpose.
The most significant shift in Maya’s outlook was a sense of purpose, “Well you know one of the first things I was thinking about today...is my purpose. And for me today to speak about [transformation] it’s about recreating in myself, into that purpose” (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya). Nature simultaneously serves to help her to discover her purpose and the truth of herself, “…I know by being in here [in nature], in this environment it’s kind of strengthened, those, that character, it feeds that character. So yeah it creates my foundation” (Nature Interview with Maya). She has taken the cues of nature’s rhythm, colour and truth and incorporated those lessons into her own being. She is a more mindful person, aware of the truth of herself and how she needs to nurture that. Maya has stepped into her true self, a confident, vibrant woman.

_I’m not afraid of the colour that I carry, all the colourful qualities of myself and I don’t try to hide them anymore or minimize them, that I wear them more proudly and it’s ok for other people to see and it’s not about having to explain away who I am every, or explain the reason of my being, it’s about being comfortable in all of that colour. Yeah and being more comfortable in the skin that I have, who I am, that I’m ok, I don’t have to change myself for anybody else except for my own well-being. I think about my old self doing the “hmmmming and the hawing” I couldn’t make decisions, very insecure, didn’t have much of a voice, never went against the grain, oh no, I was always behaving, followed the rules, did it for everybody else’s well-being, not necessarily for my own. And now it’s about the well-being of me and how I can support the things that are around me, not being [sighs] judged by or told what to do because of somebody else’s desires. I’m going to make it what’s right I’m going to determine for myself, through my own little glasses or binoculars [unclear, laughing]. But yeah, it’s about me determining myself and the things that I need for me....So yes it’s really opened my view of things, it’s really opened me up to think different ways, to act different ways and to be comfortable with all of that. To be comfortable with myself and who I am. Mmmmmmmmm, very much so. Yes I thought very much of myself as a little person. So yeah, real self-development. (Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)"

There are no longer boundaries for Maya, only limitless possibilities and she pushes herself to explore and express herself in new ways.
I'd say I'm more authentic. I push myself a little more now. If I'm uncomfortable with something, I'm open, "just suck it up Maya, take 7 breaths, whatever you need to do just get in there and I do it" and then I do and I think "oh that's not so bad" [laughing]... and it doesn't matter what people say or what they think, because I'm really happy with the real truth of me, and what that truth of me is, and their truth might be something totally different and you know what, it's ok. I don't have to change them, I only have to change myself, I only have to worry about myself. (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

Maya's expanded sense of possibility gave way to a newfound awareness of her creativity. Although she has never considered herself to be much of an artist or one gifted with words, once she embraced the possibility that she just may be, she surprised herself with a talent for sculpting animals out of stone and creating beautifully self-reflective poetry.

*The Natural World* by Maya
Celebrating this moment disclosing to you, me.

*A simple female being I am, an ordinary person finding a way to live with the given social structure among other ordinary people.*

Coming into my new life, no one again tells me how to think, be or act.

Forty three and determined at last to be, me.

As another's words are examined and harmonized against my heart, gut and head felt senses, then determining my own real experience.

If I am wrong, against whose standards are they measured.

Stripped away, in ruthless honesty, examined and concluding that the rock that I find my life wisdom on is in the wholeness I am.

Heard is Myself, talking as the internal ear is poised listening to struggles as profound and intimate, as are the ways and terms of who I am.

Ashamed whilst in the mist of such abundance as a split is unimaginable while in the midst of the turmoil and struggle. As the work gives shape to the everyday walk; studying the landscape, weather, animals and people as they fit into the life design I am.
The page contains text that is not legible due to the quality of the image. It appears to be a paragraph of text, but the content is indistinguishable.

**Note:** The text is not coherent and cannot be accurately transcribed.
The World in its unspoken worth tells me of the wild things as it rings out into this life experience as the natural understanding; the World becomes different. The strength of the Natural World seeps into my bones, my blood. A division no longer, instead becoming a part of me, not silently mentioned but sung loudly in praise.

The long stretches are comfortable, as talk is not needed, instead in its place, the sure pleasure and wholesome joy of my simple existence bubbles slowly within me.

Feeling truly so private and hardly spoken ...... 

Arriving at an understanding on how precious and unique the created World of Nature is and how deeply it has influenced my understanding of the life changes of me.

Within sweetness of the air and the sun’s warmth on my face, hands, and among a view so vast a soul is set free simply by the season’s bringing distinguishing pleasures.

Through all this growth and development Maya has also been able to step aside from her ego and adopt an almost altruistic philosophy on relationships, to be a model of what is possible:

Do I need to be published or have my picture in the paper? No, it doesn’t matter, it matters about what I do here and I hope I have a big ripple effect on my nieces and nephews and anyone that comes here, you know I want to show them only the light, cause I really believe that the light always supersedes, in the end the light always wins and I want to show them that, that um they don’t have to be boxed in or I don’t have to be boxed in to everybody else’s beliefs. (Personal Transformation Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

Clearly there are many and varied ways in which Maya has been transformed by her experiences with nature. Her artefact is called her Story Shawl a creative felted life narrative, a clear representation of just how deeply her sense of self is now rooted in nature. It is the physical manifestation of her newfound creativity, of her internal brightness, her sense of wholeness and of the many lessons she has learned to become the person she is today. It colourfully captures the lessons she has learned in nature, her close connection to and identification with nature. She shared with me the detailed
meanings represented in the *Story Shawl*, with each animal, element and symbol in the shawl being a reflection of her, of her development and history. This shawl is a very literal representation of the lessons and meanings that Maya has gained from and identified with nature.

It is round for that whole concept of incorporating everything, nothing is above or below, and *everything is connected*. When I made this piece I was, I didn’t know what it meant, I didn’t until you made me think about it Friday [laughing]. There are a lot of things that I cherish right, that I put on it, so I started to make a story. I was born and, so I come out of the void and, *I’m a raven, that’s my birth sign, and the raven holds all the keys to my, my creation and the lion of course gives me the courage to take the steps forward*. So I go back into the void and I come through here,
through the moon, through the light and then the three of past, present and future and how they’re all connected and become one. And the rabbit has always been instrumental in my well-being, before I even knew it had meaning I just liked them. And then we always need sustenance, so there’s the shaft of wheat here. My um native name is White Eagle Feather, so I decided to put the bird in but then I thought each feather I put on there I thought it was a part of me a life experience that created form for me – all those things that we talked about, I know we’ve highlighted Montana and the vision quest but even all those smaller pieces in between, so each of those feathers represent that. And this really is ascension right, travelling up. And the flame, the flame within us always going back to the creator, going back to our source…. And then of course the stars right, those bright guiding places that we always look towards. So ya and I’m sure as time goes on the story will evolve even more, as I get clarity and understanding of it. And it’s a spiral, sort of like it comes in and goes around and then up.

Emily - So this is the story of you?
Maya – Mmmmmhmmmm [standing by her Story Shawl smiling]!
Emily – What do you get from it? Do you ever turn to it sort of as a…?
Maya – Well when I do get it out to show people or and such, I always get those “ah-ha’s” you know like “oh wow” ‘cause I’m such a, I’m such a dense person sometimes [laughing] it just helps remind me again of how multi-faceted I am that I’m just not one thing, I’m made up of a whole bunch of things, they compliment each other. (Nature Interview with Maya, emphasis added)

Quinn

Quinn’s experiences of transformation are intricately intertwined with his sense of connection to and perspective of nature. He says that “true transformation” can only occur within some context of and connection to nature. “I don’t think people can fully appreciate or um, or know um, the true meaning of transformation unless they’re in touch with a higher, like a, some stronger force, I don’t think that can be done in the city” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn).

Nature itself is the central factor in Quinn’s perspective on his transformation and nature-based leisure experiences are the means by which he found himself in that transformative space. For Quinn, kayaking, snorkelling, wandering the forests looking for fallen trees to harvest for furniture, drumming and shamanic journeying or simply
sitting on his island are the ways in which he engages in nature-based leisure. He used to be an avid fisherman, but he now finds himself more drawn to experiences where he feels he is being with nature instead of overcoming or dominating nature. This desire for and valuing of a feeling of connecting to nature is demonstrated this description:

Emily – How do you feel when you’re kayaking or on your island?
Quinn – It feels, even though I’m paddling [away] from my home – like the house where I grew up in – I feel like I’m paddling home...
Emily – What makes it feel like you’re going home?
Quinn – Home to me is somewhere where you can go and not, um, you’re not supposed to have any worries when you’re at home, your home is supposed to be a place of safety [pauses]. And I guess a word I could add to [pauses] [that would be] serenity and simplicity and bliss. Um, it’s a place that you can go where no one is going to bother you...(Nature Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

This feeling of connection and belonging with nature is particularly strong on the island but he generalizes it to all of nature. Quinn has a come to a profound awareness of the interrelatedness of the world as an ecosystem, including the humans within it. This belief and awareness is not only a guiding perspective of his life but also a point of view which gives him a sense of calm and belonging in nature. To Quinn, nature is a selfless space, an entity and context in which he experiences himself as an equal being connected to all. Nature is a place of comfort, a nurturing space, a safe place for him to go where he will not be judged, where there are no expectations.

It’s always provided a place for me to go when nothing else worked, or even, you know, it’s almost like that friend, that selfless friend that’s always there and doesn’t judge you if you come to it first or go to it last. You know sometimes you have a good friend and they’ll say, “Why didn’t you come to me first?” Well nature doesn’t judge, come out and paddle around the lake or go hug a tree [laughs] or go do whatever you like to do, um, it’s there no matter what, you know. (Nature Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)
Additionally, Quinn also finds it necessary to hone a special relationship with specific places, for he understands nature to be something with which humans can also develop a relationship of knowing, hearing, feeling and communicating, just as he would do with another person. Fostering this relationship has been an important part of coming to a sense of comfort, and of being home on his island.

I think that’s why it’s really important to have a sacred place, if you can go out in nature and you can go to all kinds of different places, but I think the more you go to the same spot, it’s almost like you a build a trust between what’s there and yourself. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

When Quinn is on his island he feels this sense of connection, he is comfortable, safe, worry free and overcome by a feeling of peace. The comfort he feels coupled with the quiet and stillness of nature situates him for a state of reflection and contemplation, a state that allows him to recognize his own completeness.

There’s no place I can go sit in the city or there’s no movie I can watch, there’s no song I can hear that gives me the feeling, there’s just this indescribable feeling of peace, you just, you feel like you have everything… it’s so hard to put into words, like you just um, you, when I’m there I feel whole, I don’t need to go anywhere and I don’t need to check in with anyone and I just go there and listen and wait for whatever is coming, usually I get some kind of crazy deep thoughts or [laughing] some kind of, like some kind of encounter with interesting animals. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

In that state of completeness Quinn finds himself open and willing to learning from the things he encounters whether plant, animals or otherwise.

Unlike urban environments Quinn finds he is more aware, his senses are heightened and his mind less distracted by the busyness and noise that is so characteristic of a cityscape. In the quiet of nature he can better tune into as well as the wisdom of
nature. In the quiet and tranquility of nature, his awareness of self and environment are expanded.

When you go out to these [natural places] after being in the city for a long time…it’s almost like you’re seeing things in true 3-dimension, like the trees just become, everything looks so much deeper, it’s almost like my vision opens right up and my ears are ringing because it’s so quiet. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

I value [the quiet] because it’s almost like it’s an endangered species [laughing]. Quiet is becoming endangered. Um you can go, really you can go up to the Arctic and it’s quiet but progressively the world is getting louder, what are we going to do when it’s not quiet anymore?…if it’s always noisy then we’re focused on what the noise is rather than what’s in the quiet. I think there’s a lot more in the quiet than there is in the noise. (Nature Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

In his experiences with nature, Quinn’s curiosity is heightened and he is able to move into a mind-space of what is possible beyond what he already knows or what is fed to him by society. This experience of a childlike openness to learning and discovering his environment and himself is something that is less available to him in the city where there is a constant bombardment of social messages, advertising and ways to numb or distract himself with video games and movies. He finds these opportunities for discovery and embracing his sense of curiosity to be addictive.

There’s something new to be found every time I go out to the forest…. Um, you’re just going in there excited and totally open-minded. And then you don’t know what you’re going to take out of it and sometimes you come of it like almost all the time you’re just going to feel great coming out, maybe you didn’t go in there with intensions of finding [anything]… when you’re out in nature you’re back to being an animal … that’s why I guess my sense of curiosity and excitement with back to being a student in nature. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Quinn’s experience of feeling all at once more aware of himself and his surroundings, relaxed in a comfortable space and at peace in the quiet of nature allows him to clear his mind and be more receptive and open to his present moment experience.
It is this combination of feelings that come together in what Quinn identifies as a transformative moment.

I’m trying to think of how I felt that day. Almost like you um, personally I felt like I was ready for anything; I was completely open to everything; everything changed just how I feel during the transformation. You feel - I don’t want to say that you feel nothing - but you you just hit this blank spot…. but it um it feels, you’re reflecting, but at the same time…you’re very receptive or at least I was, I was very receptive like I, my senses were almost so sharp and fine tuned that I didn’t want to miss anything.

( personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

Feeling aware and open to nature has allowed Quinn to interpret nature as a constant source of learning and meaningful metaphors. He tells me about “mini transformations” as being those moments when you simply lose yourself in the rhythm of nature and how those moments serve to ground him and inspire him to model nature.

…it’s almost like um, a glimpse into a simpler life, it’s that craving for a simpler life …it’s that comforting feeling of the simpler life that allows me to be more conscious, when I’m not worrying about the stupid things like is my phone bill paid, what’s my bank account at, can I afford this, or should I buy gas, or maybe I should bike there, it’s like, I can just brush it all aside and that’s what I crave going out there, it’s like everything is on pause. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

Quinn’s most significant and healing transformative experience with nature was beautifully captured in two photographs he shares with me. He told me of being alone on his island, drumming, chanting and performing shamanic fire ceremonies to welcome in a healing encounter. He was in a painful time of his life and went to the island to find that quiet comfort and he hoped he could release some of his emotional burden. Quinn’s artefacts perfectly symbolize his understanding and experience of personal transformation and nature-based leisure: his drum represents his call to nature and the pink and blue pictures represent nature’s answers.
I went out seeking, I used the drum and offered my sacrifice to the fire to the universe in hopes that I would receive answers or change or just something and I feel that the answer is in that picture. I don’t know I still get amazed, especially when I look at the pink [photograph], I just get a, it’s like I want to say thanks. Um to me it just shows like, here’s the call [touches drum], here’s the answers [points to pictures]. (Nature Interview with Quinn, emphasis added).
These are the pictures I took of the island that day....*You can totally see it [the sun] connecting*, you can see the Earth, the atmosphere, you can see the layers you can see the different fields coming off of the sun, it’s [laughs]....*These represent to me, like this is my, like that’s almost like my reassurance that my call was answered that day.* Who answered I don’t I know, someone or something did. Like *I believe that a lot of the courage and a lot of the changes that I felt came through that, to me that looks like a surge, un, something came to me that day...when I was done, I felt bigger, like I felt taller, I don’t know like maybe I was or I wasn’t but I honestly felt like I was a couple feet taller, wider, bigger...And that’s really helped me to, it’s been a *trust boost*, like again it’s been very *humbling* to have felt that, that day and again *reassuring* that um that *the help is there if you ask for it* and I definitely, I *don’t think I would have seen that from my front yard*, like we have a fire pit, but it’s not the same, *you have to be out, alone, in the quiet, away from everything....I can definitely sit here right now and look at [the pictures] and say going into, *at that moment I wasn’t who I am now, I was in this body but the realization, I wasn’t as conscious as I am now...and that was the unexpected answer... it comes to you like that, literally beams down at you*, that’s what I get from this. (Nature Interview with Quinn)
Through experiences like this, Quinn’s outlook on life, sense of self and relationships have been transformed. His perspective on life is now filtered through a nature lens, a more altruistic, holistic and positive lens. Everything he does, all he sees is filtered through a renewed belief in the interconnection of all beings and the need to act intentionally to bring good for all, including the environment, while maintaining his sense of self and values as a man devoted to nature. Quinn’s actions and choices are now guided by a more altruistic motivation and by the simplicity of nature. He realizes and takes responsibility for the impact his actions and lifestyle choices will have on future generations and thus has lost interest in material possessions and engaging in a consumer lifestyle.

I’m honouring myself; it goes back to just honouring what we’re sitting on right now [grass, earth, Earth] and the island and just making sure that things are going to be there for future generations. For me that’s, I go there [to nature] for answers of how I can do more, how I can help more, not obtain more power for power-tripping but how to obtain more power to help. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)
You don’t have to have the best hair and you don’t have to have the best, the $60 shirt, get the $3 one. I became, for awhile I was very, I became pretty superficial for awhile and bringing garbage bags of stuff to Salvation Army. I felt so relieved... it’s a very fulfilling feeling letting go of all of that clutter, you don’t need it. (Nature Interview with Quinn)

Freed from the clutter created by his former lifestyle and now feeling more in tune with a sustainable lifestyle, Quinn feels unstoppable. He also feels he is able to listen to his instincts, he trusts himself and in that has found a greater self-confidence and inspiration to be more proactive and assertive.

The biggest message I’ve taken is to trust your instincts and gut feelings, not necessarily make snap decisions but if you have something eating away at you, put it on the table and if you want to know more about how to get it out there and deal with it then go for a walk, go to the woods. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

It’s given me a real sense of well-being and almost like a feeling of, you almost feel like, I joked around the other day, you feel like unstoppable, not in a power-tripping way but it’s almost like you feel like you’re constantly moving forward... if you see something you want you go for it and you don’t slow down, don’t question it but if it doesn’t feel right go the other way and that all goes back to the trusting the gut, and trusting your instinct, and that’s what it’s taught me, that’s what my transformation has taught me. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

His transformations with nature allowed him to make meaning of his traumas and to heal, but they also changed his overall outlook: “I’ve learned how to change my mindset, positive is contagious!” (Nature Interview with Quinn). Quinn is no longer burdened by depression, he has a positive outlook inspired by this trust in himself, his instincts and also in nature and the universe supporting any dreams or intentions he sets out to achieve.

...you can really become quite the magician if you really believe in having the power to bring whatever you want into your life and that’s a big transformation – like realizing that, it’s like, it’s when you realize that you can do anything... do things that you didn’t think were possible,
something like that is so changing for me. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Quinn’s positive attitude about his life extends to others as well. Quinn sees potential in everyone in terms of transforming, healing and serving a more altruistic purpose that is in harmony with nature. He has come to the conclusion that all people should and need to reconnect with nature and in that reconciliation to discover the widespread need to protect the Earth.

As humans you know I think we have the ability to change our mindsets and what’s going on up here, like with us, how we, because we do impact the earth, but I think ultimately if the earth wants to do something there’s very little that humans can do...and I do feel that we owe, you owe respect to your host, you know you don’t go to someone’s house and break their dishes, you know really we’re guests here, the earth was here to be honest, I think as a race we will wake up and realize that um we owe the Earth a lot more respect than we’re giving it, or him, or her, or them [laughing] who knows what we’re sitting on [laughs]. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Quinn recognizes that his purpose, his relationships and sense of self will all evolve just as nature does, he says quite simply “I’m a work in progress” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn). This acceptance of his evolution comes from his perspective of life as an ongoing learning experience, a concept that excites him.

Emily – Um, ok before I move onto the next question, if you were to make just like a one sentence statement about Quinn before transformation and Quinn after transformation what would those descriptions be?
Quinn – One sentence?
Emily – Sure one sentence or two, a couple, you can have a couple [laughs].
Quinn – So I would say for example, before transformation Quinn was “blank,” like underline, fill in the missing word. Um, hmmm. I need a couple of minutes.
Emily – Sure.
Quinn – Before transformation Quinn was learning, learning without knowing he’s in school [laughs]. Ya, life is school. And after transformation, wow that’s a really good question, I don’t consider myself a know-it-all that’s for sure, hmmm... After my transformation I was
humbled, but at the same time, [laughing] craving more, I am really
anxious to know more but not, but not selfish, um, humble but wanting to
know more, like eager, an eager student, like "hey wow, I'm in school,
this isn't so bad"! (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn,
emphasis added)

His newfound perspective of life as a classroom now affords him a sense of calm,
allowing him to let life and learning happen instead of always feeling the need to manage
and control what is happening. He used to be worried and anxious about his life but he
says he now “…put[s] the energy towards observing and watching and taking it in rather
than planning, I step back and I watch how it unfolds rather than trying to be caught up in
the middle of it” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn). In being able to step
back he has also become a more astute observer of both others and himself. From this
mindful yet detached position he is better able to reflect and question his environment
and self.

Quinn is a more holistically minded person now and not only in his overall
outlook but also in his sense of self. He cares for and is mindful of himself in mind, body
and spirit and recognizes the need to care for each aspect of himself. “You can’t be more
productive spiritually – in my opinion – unless you’re putting more effort into taking care
of yourself physically and it, right along with that too is mentally” (Personal
Transformation Interview with Quinn).

A major factor in caring for himself is being true to where he feels best, where he
feels he belongs – in nature. In some ways Quinn feels that instead of being transformed
into a new or different person, he has actually returned to where he began, as a care-free
child at home in nature. Quinn now embraces the curiosity, wonder and enthusiasm that
being in nature brings out in him.
Well for me when I can go up into the woods and look at trees and think back to the kid I was, wanting to learn everything, like just a little keener and just trying to learn all I could and...it’s almost like you get this feeling come over you that you know exactly, you know you’re where you need to be and it’s almost like you can stop um questioning why it is that you’re doing what you are and just reaching that step is a transformation, kind of a step back to becoming what you wanted to be. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

Being where he feels he belongs also speaks to his newfound sense of purpose: “I don’t even know if this exists but I want to be the world’s first and best environmental interpreter, speak for the planet you know, speak for the trees or grass or whatever” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn). He wants to spread environmental awareness and to bring people closer to nature, both physically and in their conscious mind. Doing this work is not even like work to him, it is a pleasure, it is his passion and he is happy to spend his time dedicated to doing what is meaningful and important to him and to let go of other pastimes that no longer fit his values and purpose.

I feel that’s one of the roles I need to fill is to provide more access, and more awareness to people and that’s kind of why I’ve – starting with the photography and woodwork – messages through media, through work, through artwork and just um those are just um like those are some of the sacrifices you make... like it’s almost like another full time job at night, um just to get the message out there ‘cause I feel I owe it to it, I owe it to this, I owe it to them [nature] and the more, I feel that the more I do, for them, the more [nature will] tell me, the more [nature will] teach me, [and] the further I go with it the happier I become, it’s, it’s not even a give-and-take-relationship, it’s like a give-give relationship and it just gets better [laughing]. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Quinn’s sense of purpose and passion about nature has been driven forward by his new sense of personal power, courage and ability to be assertive. In the past Quinn’s ability to break out of his shell and take on leadership positions was hampered by self-doubt and a nagging inner pessimism.
It reminds me of the cowardly lion syndrome, you know the cowardly lion was always timid and always big and capable but he never really learned to roar until he was really confronted with danger... and I think that um it was my inner child, like my inner child and spirit was you know, it had enough and it was time, like it was \textit{time to get rid of this pessimist part of me} that kept popping it's ugly head in and just kind of saying you know “that’s enough” um, that I wasn’t going to put up with it anymore and just this \textit{huge surge of power, courage} [during his transformative experience]. (Nature Interview with Quinn, emphasis added)

In many respects Quinn has been humbled by his transformative experiences and he tells me that on a few occasions. This humbleness takes on different forms in his life, for in experiencing that there are larger powers at work, he has been able to relinquish control and egocentric attitudes. He as become more mindful and less reactive as he has quietly and confidently stepped into a truer sense of self.

...once I got back into touch with who I was I was able to catch myself sometimes like before a reaction would come out of my mouth... when I learned how to separate myself from the ego side, the ego being just the constant need for finding negative in things, almost like the, I don’t know everything about the ego and I don’t know everything about spirit but I know there’s a difference between the two and I know that if you can’t learn how to distinguish the two it can be a real battle in your mind. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

In coming to face and begin to overcome his ego, Quinn has transformed not just his sense of self but his relationships and interactions too. He is able to be more authentically present, better able listen more intently and with less judgment instead of trying to find places to jump in and offer his quick opinion: “Like I’ve become less and less the centre of attention, I think you can learn a lot more by listening than talking” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn). With his self-confidence quietly but firmly intact Quinn desires meaningful and self-revealing conversations and finds himself frustrated by frivolous, seemingly empty conversations:
It’s hard to have small talk with people anymore. I have a really hard time talking about the weather with people.... Like when someone starts talking to me about weather [laughs] I just kind of laugh like “ah man, come on you can do better than that”... (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Quinn’s humble self-confidence and genuine expression of self inspired an interest in connecting with people on a deeper level and has allowed him to be more emotionally expressive. He tells me that he now has a deeper appreciation of his family and that he feels good about finally allowing himself to freely to express his true self in a loving and appreciative way.

...for a long time there I had a hard time hugging my family ‘cause we were sort of brought up in the mind set that you work hard and then you work hard you know you don’t necessarily get the chance to play hard but at the same time those were sort of misconceptions I put on myself growing up....now I have no problem saying I love you to Mom and Dad. For a long time I would never say it, I would always have to wait for them to say it first but now I’ll say it first and I won’t feel bad, like I won’t feel weird about it, and I hug them, a lot. Like I miss my brother and I never used to my brother, we’re just so different and I couldn’t stand him but now I love him for his differences. (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn)

Quinn has come into a place where he is satisfied and confident in who he is, his place in the world and the gifts he has to share. In this new place of contentment Quinn desires a meaningful relationship in a life-partner. He tells me of his desire for a relationship that will allow him to share his actualized true self, his appreciative, patient, loving and authentic self.

Quinn’s transformative experiences with nature have helped him return to the person he’s always known inside, a curious, enthusiastic and nature-loving inner child who feels connected to nature and quietly confident in who he is and what his purpose is. For Quinn there is no place quite like nature to return a person to their true self, for to
Quinn time with nature is time at home, a place that is safe open and accepting of him just as he is.

*Naomi*

Naomi did not always have a close and valued relationship with nature, but today nature serves as a place of healing, learning, as a guide for her values and lifestyle and a pathway to her true self. Naomi beautifully describes how her experiences in nature somehow require her to step into her own, to stand confidently within the supportive context of nature. For in nature there are no “excuses” or external influences or factors, she must face herself. She attributes her ability and willingness to explore her capabilities and push her boundaries to a feeling that this is what is required of her in nature.

I think you know going through um the outdoor experiences in nature is [laughs] I think it’s the nature lesson, is um like kind of responsibility in that you know it’s you, and it’s nature. And so it’s not anyone’s fault or anyone else’s responsibility, it’s you and it’s nature or you know, great creator, god, whatever. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Nature is something that Naomi perceives almost as a way of being, or a way to potentially experience being. In the physical context of nature Naomi has had meaningful and transformative experiences that have perhaps given her glimpse into this experience of being her true nature. The centrality of nature in her transformative experiences is important to understand, for as Naomi understands it, nature is a force of sorts that acts upon her as well as a physical place and context.

Naomi – Oh, um, hmmm. You know my first thought is [laughs] in and by, um with seems you know to me means that I have like some control over it which I don’t really think I did, um. So I would say it was you know, in nature, by nature.

Emily – In nature, by nature. So how, how do you describe in and by.
Naomi – Well in, in nature because it’s you know, the process has been while I’ve been in natural settings, you know in nature and then just nature – by nature – nature being what it is, kind of makes it all happen. Emily – How does nature make it happen? Naomi – Well you know because I experienced so many different things I mean, you can sit out listening or just sitting there and you hear things and you see things and um you know you feel things so that all together it kind of makes the transformation….. it’s just there and what you’re meant to um pick out or what’s meant to affect you will get there, if you’re open to it. (Nature Interview with Naomi)

Nature-based experiences are unlike any other experiences Naomi has had; she feels that that she is fully experiencing it instead of simply going through the motions. She describes nature-based leisure as being meaningful, purposeful and holistically engaging, the context of nature and the activities themselves provided another layer of meaning: “it gave me a context for strong that made sense” (Nature Interview with Naomi). This stands in contrast to other leisure experiences that have been less personally engaging and meaningful.

I loved the physical challenge of you know the portage and the canoeing but also combined with the more nurturing aspect. I thought, wow I really thrive in these kind of conditions. So that probably started with the Colorado, ‘cause that’s the first time that I did something that physical without it being about structure. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi).

When you’re part of the experience and that means you know carrying your own stuff or even just being out there being part of it, there’s such a big physical aspect to that, wind, sound, touch, smells that you know I mean just all of that is more in tune I think with just my way of being than just cerebral I don’t really think I’m one of those people [laughs]. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

It feels like I’m really part of the experience as opposed to like um we did a Disney World vacation, you go through that vacation and it’s, it’s a rat race you know it’s commercial, it’s all of those things and you come back and you’ve never really had that relaxation that you would get in nature so even though you can do some very strenuous things, you, it’s more of a peaceful feeling ‘cause you’re part of life…. I came back with the, like such a great feeling um, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically, that
I had never really gotten from an experience before... just able to feel it all, see it all, it, that made the difference for me so you know once you get that great feeling you go, kind of I think veer towards experiences that are going to provide that. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added) (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added).

Whether Naomi was sitting huddled under a tarp waiting for a storm to pass, taking in mountainous scenery, mushing across open fields of snow and ice or simply sitting quietly by a lake in the early morning she feels a sense of quiet and overwhelming awe. She tells me many stories of breathtaking vistas, storms and conditions that humble and through it all she maintains a deep sense of belonging and connection.

I mentioned the horse ranch in Colorado...I was really afraid, I’m afraid of horses, you know I thought that at a lot of times that we were just going to fall off the side of this mountain – steep inclines and things – but at every minute I was just in awe of the beauty and of the, I had like um, feelings [laughs] you know of um, connection with ancestors, with um heritage, and um, all that came before me of what the lives were like in these mountains and so I don’t know that was kind of how it started. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Naomi – We were in Colorado and I think it was Maggie said something like “I think I experienced God” or something. We were out on this ride and just you know beauty everywhere, I thought, “you know she might be onto something here” like this is, the worship, in the beauty in nature and for me that was real, that was you know I could see how that all made sense, and so you know um, we were in Northern Minnesota dog sledding, cold, cold, cold, like um, but again so beautiful and so powerful and stark and you start to realize, I did anyway – oh I am such a small insignificant of this whole picture, again, I would think it is a religious experience, because of what it meant for me.

Emily – What was that like for you to come into that thought, that “I’m such a small part of this?”

Naomi – Oh it was this awe, it was just, that’s the only word I can put on it, I mean it was a big realization, I don’t know if I realized how big at the time but I mean when you’re able to just sit there an go “Mmmmm this is amazing”. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Part of being able to experience this sense of awe has to do with the quiet of nature. Just as Naomi identifies the beauty in nature as something real, there is
something special for Naomi about being in the quiet as well. To Naomi the quiet of nature is about the absence of man-made noise as well as the sounds of nature and in that quiet she connects with a feeling of what Truth is.

Naomi – Oh, um, the setting you know, [the retreat centre] is really ideal, ‘cause you have um, you know I once thought and I’m sure I journalled about it but [Round Lake] talks to me, you know what I mean, I can be out there and it’s quiet, quiet’s big for me, um, I love quiet. Um, so that definitely, [the retreat centre] definitely has the quiet of the water which is always been important for me, you know I think from swimming but um just even now you know, lakes, ponds, pools, rivers, you know anyway I can get it, it always means something. And just you know the total kind of submersion in nature. I mean even though I know I have some events that aren’t as submerged as when I’m up at [the retreat centre] or Algonquin…I still definitely rely on nature that I have but um, you know we really, um the [retreat centre] area calls me.

Emily – What is it about quiet and water?

Naomi – It’s, I think it’s um, quiet for me, is True. I think and I mean I love, like when I’m outside the crickets, I love the cricket sound, um the birds in the morning, you know that kind of thing is good, um, but it’s True…

Emily – How does [quiet] contribute to a transformative experience or lend to one?

Naomi – I think it’s the authenticity because I think um without the external, it forces you to more look at what’s really going on. If you have um phones ringing or people talking or even yourself talking, um, it’s taking away I think from what needs to be going on, because you’re putting everything out there or something is coming in that’s not meant to come in. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

When Naomi retreats to nature and has that sense of connection in the quiet her well-being is enhanced. These experiences are not isolated to grand adventures in Northern Minnesota or remote lakes in Algonquin Park; I also asked her about sitting on her back porch admiring her favourite oak tree.

Emily – Um. Would you consider like time, right in the morning, like with your oak tree, would you consider that to be nature-based leisure or?

Naomi – Ya.

Emily – How is that for you? How do you experience that time?
Naomi – It’s um, restorative, um, its grounding. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Naomi tells me this soothing context of nature naturally slows her down, an experience she tries to bring home with her. She tells me stories of riding past streams flowing down a mountain or sitting and appreciating the calmness of a lake and how that brings her a sense of peace and calm. She identifies with the rhythms and pace of nature and finds herself more appreciative of the beauty of nature which has helped her to slow down and be more mindful of the little things of her everyday routines.

[Nature] probably started the slowing down thing ‘cause I almost, I did literally have to force myself but the experiences um, the meditation work, the you know, slowing yourself down and you know sitting by that lake and it just starts happening and then you try to bring that back and incorporate that into your daily life. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

The spiritual nature of everything I think just helps to be more grounded, I think that leads to the calm and contentment and that just impacts everything I think day-to-day. You know whereas before, even thought I’m doing pretty much the same thing, probably I’m doing more, it doesn’t have that frantic, overwhelmed flavour that life before this did. You know I wake up in the morning, I actually now um I get up an hour before I have to start getting ready for work and I have coffee...so my morning is quiet time with coffee and reading or meditating, I light my little red candle there ....and look at the field and so then as I start to get ready for work I’m in a much better place. Had I done it the old way which is you know get up at the very last second and then frantically trying to get myself ready and out the door. After the vision quest I became aware of what I listen to, what I watch, I um I don’t like all that garbage going in there and I realize that you know a lot of it on radio on TV, it’s a lot of junk that I just don’t want to put in there so I um I drive to work with nothing but it’s, my drive almost all the way into the city is just beautiful, it’s farms, 2-way [roads], in all seasons there’s something beautiful. So that’s a big change ‘cause I’m more relaxed and even though I’m doing the same things, it doesn’t have that anxious edge. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

In this state of calm, her mind sometimes wanders back to her habits of the city like worrying about time and constant thoughts of “what’s next.” In nature however, she
tells me these thoughts don’t fit and furthermore within this quiet and contemplative space of nature she finds herself reflecting on the behaviours and thought patterns she has brought with her into nature, making deeper meaning of her nature-based leisure experiences.

My life is really time driven and you know I used to be totally goal oriented and so we’re canoeing along and it’s just absolutely beautiful and I’m thinking um “where are we going,” “when are we going to get there” and then all of the sudden I thought “oh, where am I going?” and it was just in that one instance I got so deep and so totally refocused that it um, it was a big moment. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Within this context of newness, authenticity, and meaningful, holistic engagement, Naomi found herself stepping beyond her comfort zone and into a new way of experiencing herself. Within nature she feels both safe and comfortable to explore things she has never done before but also propelled by an inner drive to make the most of her experiences. She tells me a story of swimming in a river on horseback.

I was stepping out of my comfort zone, um but I just grabbed onto it...they said “who wants to go swimming on their horse in this river” and I was like, “I’m going to do this”, you know so I mean I tried to grab onto experiences that some people were like “oh I’m not going to go do that”... and it was just amazing. I was thrilled that I had the courage to um you know be ok with that and so I just tried to, through that week to do things to push myself a little bit, to trust, even though you know I wouldn’t have called it that at that time. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

The people Naomi met along the way also pushed her comfort zones in terms of witnessing people who seemingly living their lives with passions and purpose that emanated from within. She enthusiastically recalled to me the moments of appreciation and admiration she had for people who made their living running dog sledding experiences or running nature retreat centres. Even little things like having a retreat leader request that no make-up be worn opened her to questioning many of the social
The investigation into the condition of the item was carried out by a team of experts. They examined the item thoroughly, noting any signs of wear or damage. The results of their examination were recorded in a detailed report.

The report concluded that the item was in good condition, with minor wear and tear. However, the team recommended that regular maintenance checks be conducted to ensure its continued functionality.

In light of their findings, the item was returned to the owner, who was grateful for the thorough examination and the clear recommendations provided in the report.
norms that she had unconsciously agreed to. Recognizing the quality of life and satisfaction these people had doing these alternative things were “ah-ha” moments in her life.

I certainly wasn’t aware that I was running from something, I always thought that the business was my life, I really truly did, I have a pretty fast-paced job, um, you know, pretty good commute, I thought that everybody lived like that. So when you start to see people, um, you know Mary is a good example, relaxed, calm, at peace, you know, deals with what needs to be done, takes care of herself – self-care is a big thing – um, then, I mean I still fought it because one of the things I’ve been given is “the Mom, you know, doesn’t take time for herself” that just you know, that would be a horrible thing, that would be selfish and only terrible moms did that kind of thing so you know you start to experience, you, you go, “well I don’t think this is such a bad thing” and gradually, little bits, little bits. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

I have an appreciation for people that um are living life, I don’t want to say “abnormally” but from how I was raised and how I am living my life, these people are taking a passion and they’re sharing it with people, kind of like [the retreat centre owners], or the fellow that runs the dog sledding place or even the ranch in Colorado. Most people would go “big deal” but then you experience and you see what he’s experienced... and it just [pauses] you go “that is to be admired, that is how more of us should be living”.

Emily – Had you thought about, prior to watching people do something that they’re really passionate about, had to you thought about that, about what you were in and what you were doing?
Naomi – No, no I really hadn’t. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Naomi’s nature-based leisure experiences have provided her with a series of awakening experiences which expanded her sense of the possible in terms of herself and reshaped her outlook on life. She has a new baseline of what is authentic and she now uses nature as a touchstone in her continual development and self-exploration.

An overarching theme of Naomi’s transformation was her newfound sense of connection to nature. She is now very aware of the interconnection of her life with nature
and this sense of connection has put nature into a position of priority in her life. “I always had an awareness of the environment but not of the big picture, so once I got a taste of the big picture, it was transforming in itself to realize your place in all of this” (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi). Naomi believes it is necessary for the sake of her well-being to nurture her connection with nature:

I have different priorities really, you know nature is a big thing for me. Nature means, taking time to see what’s going on, taking time to um be quiet and um watch and listen and feel. I don’t think it was one specific um outdoor experience but all of them together that gradually gets you where you need to be, and I knew it was the right avenue for me after the first couple times I go ok I know I need in my life this time outside, extended time outside. (Nature Interview with Naomi)

Naomi’s sense of connection to nature has a spiritual dimension. Nature is not just a place to her anymore but an entity to be honoured and respected. Her experiences with nature have filled a gap that her Catholic upbringing never did.

...you know [in terms of] spiritually I’ve experienced a big transformation ... changing more of my belief to nature-spirit-based then like a rigid religious practice. It’s interesting today coming home I saw, coming out of my parking lot there’s a car with a bumper sticker on it and it was um “earth, air, fire and water” and then underneath it, it said something like “honouring Her” or something like that and I was like “oh wow” [laughing] that resonates with me. (Nature Interview with Naomi)

This sense of connection to, spiritual relationship with and prioritizing of nature has influenced Naomi’s value system, as honouring that connection is what now guides her lifestyle choices. Naomi has abandoned her image-focused and consumer-driven ways and embraced a more conscious and more minimalist lifestyle. As she tells me, it allows her to give more attention to what really matters to her.

*I’m just like this little tiny speck in this whole big thing* and I’m lucky to be here and so I need to, I’ve been allowed to be a part of this so now I have to give back in whatever way that means and you know just in day-to-day life I try to be careful with what I use and what you know
packaging and you know my small little ways. Even with the “stuff” you
know I’m becoming more minimalistic, *you know more really is not
to better.* (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

By releasing herself from the things that she no longer values and more
consciously prioritizing the things that she truly values, Naomi now experiences an
enhanced sense of appreciation for her life.

I would come home from um the Vision Quest I think it was I walked into
my home and I, *I felt a sense of um you know contentment,* “I do like my
house, I do” you know “it’s home” all my familiar things are here which
for a long time I really wrestled with the whole, “I don’t feel comfortable,
I don’t feel you know put together here, it’s just.” But when I came home
from that, the sun coming through the blinds I remember that perfectly, so
you know that was probably an awareness point…. “God I am really
content, like I don’t think there’s anything, if I had to like call the end
right here right now, I don’t think I’d be running out to “oh my god I
forgot to you know”… if somebody would have asked me 3 weeks ago, I
probably wouldn’t have said “oh yeah I’m content, I don’t need to do, you
know, anything else”. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi,
emphasis added)

Naomi is at once more appreciative of the life she has and also more aware of the
possibility for a different kind of life, one more drive by an inner purpose. She tells me
that she’s only begun to imagine what her gifts may be to share with the world but that
this prospect alone is both comforting and inspiring. Knowing that there are more
possibilities gives her a sense of ease and appreciation in her current life situation
because the possibilities of change and meaning seem more probable. She shares this
perspective with her daughter who is now thinking about college and university and what
she “should” do.

I said “no, you know if you could do anything what would it be?” Like
you have to think about what you love and don’t go by expectations of
someone else ‘cause I think that’s kind of what I did but without even, you
know I didn’t feel the expectation, I didn’t um, it’s wasn’t conscious at all,
it was like ok I need to get a job because we’re supposed to work and so
I’m just going to throw this out there until I find a job…so no thought at
all into “what do I really love?” “What do I really want to do when I grow up?” You know, so I’m starting a little late [laughing]. Better late than never right [laughing]. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

Her recognition of a person’s inner knowing and desires is a part of her new sense of self that comes from within. She feels more confident, more appreciative of her own personal strength, more aware of her needs and has a more grounded perspective on what it means to be healthy.

I’m confident in being a woman I’m confident in you know my beliefs, um choices….I have to say just becoming strong in self and my beliefs … just Honouring myself and my needs, figuring out what those needs are, I never gave them a thought until I started going through this. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

Naomi – I think probably the trip to Colorado, although I didn’t really make any changes at that point, that was the first um time when I really realized what personal strength was about.

Emily – You said you realized what personal strength was about, what is that about for you now?

I started to put all of that together, like how do I feel, what am I eating and what is it doing to my body like how did I feel when I was eating so much sugar and um junk and how do I feel now when I’ve made some changes there and the same with the exercise um, so ya I think I’m getting to a better place now where it’s not about how you look, how does it feel and what, and I want to be able to do things like be able to canoe and that sort of thing and that’s what I want my strength to be about … To be strong and to be physically able to do these things that are you know, and I think that’s what our bodies were meant to do, it wasn’t about how they looked, but about getting through day to day life…so for me it’s trying to find that um, that balance of what it’s meant to be. (Nature Interview with Naomi)

The combination of her expanded sense of personal possibility, her confidence in a true self and her appreciation of nature has inspired her to explore a wide varied of creative outlets from photography to quilting to painting her house. She had always stayed away from expressive and creative endeavours as her life circumstances never nurtured those dimensions of her self.
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I started appreciating more the beauty and the colour and everything in nature that I wanted to bring more of that into my life you know what I mean like when you’re out there, there’s not a whole lot of beige [laughing]... nature has all of that in it and you just need to bring it in and I’m still trying to do that with plants... I feel the need to have some of that stuff in here ‘cause I don’t and it’s just something that lately I’ve been deciding that I need. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

Naomi’s relationships have also been transformed, she finds herself to be more patient and understanding. In caring for and being more aware of herself, she finds herself able to interact with others in more loving and authentic ways.

And then with my relationship with others... as a parent, the spouse and daughters, sibling, the more content you are with yourself the more you take care of yourself, the better you are able to care and give to others... I think I’m more relaxed as a parent and as a spouse. The contentment I think kind of rubs off on other people - the way you put yourself out there is what you get back. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi)

Naomi’s artefacts are an eclectic collection of journal entries and objects of symbolic importance. This collection perfectly brings together the various ways in which Naomi has encountered personal transformation within nature-based leisure.
The whale reminds me to pay attention and to hear what's being said. Um the pocket dolls, um, I was absolutely not paying attention to intuition um, dreams, you know not thinking on any of that, pocket dolls reminds me that you know everything is for a reason and you need to think about it, listening to yourself, intuition and um, 'cause this pocket doll was kind of like Vasalisa's intuition and having the courage to follow what it says and um like not being afraid of it. The um, pinecones remind me that you know my little immediate family, Matthew and Maggie, that we are individuals but we are connected and we have to honour that connection, the individuality, which [laughs] is sometimes hard to do...before all this work I wanted it to be, I wanted everyone to be who and what I thought they should be, not um, you know, not causing problems for me [laughs]. I wanted it to be easy, so now I know that's not maybe what it's meant to be, it's meant to be about who everyone is meant to be, not who I want them to be. The rock, before I was not aware of all that um, I was not aware of you know stability and um permanence I guess you know, ancestors, all that is kind of tied up in the rock and now you know I go
there are some things that are although changing, they’re, they’re there, they’re strong, they’re you know, and um you know same with honouring the ancestors, now I know that that’s a part of who I am, that’s a part of who and what I put out there everyday so I need to be more um aware of it and conscious maybe of you know how I want to be. And the shell, you know before I would say I took for granted all the qualities that water gave me, all the importance, the significance, the um, and actually I’ve got to be honest with you this [interview process] is taking it another step further because I’m realizing like um this is maybe more important than I even thought. Um, and especially when I look back at my totems and I have all the water things going on and maybe I need to take another look at that but now I try, yeah so my shell is, and really all the elements that I need to incorporate it more into my life and be aware of.

E – How do they, in general, intersect with nature? Like some of them are actual pieces from nature and symbolic of it, but of your experiences?

Naomi - Um, you know I guess none of this would have happened had it not been, had I not had the experiences I don’t think? Um, ‘cause it, you know it opens mind, heart, being, that I don’t think that would have happened without the nature intersection. Um specifically I don’t know. You know I just, I couldn’t have gotten to this point without nature-based leisure...you know being out there, without it just, everything happens so differently depending on the environment. I, you know, I’ve done a lot of work in a lot of different ways and nothing has had the impact of you know the time outside. Like individual counselling, ya it was good, gives you stuff to think about, but nothing like the nature-based um adventures [laughing], in more ways than one. (Nature Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

Naomi feels safe within nature, she feels supported, connected and in that space she experiences a new way of belonging. Naomi’s senses are heightened, her comfort zone is pushed and she becomes aware of herself, her intuition and her environment at a deeper level. She embraces the tranquility of nature as it provides a meditative setting for introspection and reflection on her life and her self away from the distractions and superficiality of modern Western life. Naomi’s transformative experiences with nature have been progressive realizations that she is capable of more than she had ever imagined and that her life can take on a whole new form than the one she has been living.
Transformative Outcomes Shared by all Co-researchers

Just as it was important to outline the collective constructions of personal transformation and nature at the beginning of this chapter, it seems necessary and appropriate to close this chapter with a clear account of the shared outcomes. This section will be organized using the same format for the presentation of this collective outcomes, as was used for personal transformation and nature definitions. The following discussions of the collective transformative outcomes are organized into three sections: outlook on life, self, and relationships. Again, this is not an end in itself, but yet another building block towards the composite depiction of the essence.

Outlook on Life

All co-researchers have a much different outlook on life as a result of their transformative experiences with nature-based leisure. Our collective understanding of nature was discussed at the beginning of this chapter and our beliefs can be summed up in five points: humans as a part of nature; our awareness of the totality of nature; our deep sense of connection to nature; our view of nature as the embodiment of truth; and finally our identification with the rhythms of nature. Coming to this view of nature was in itself part of our transformation, however I will not return to a discussion of nature but instead I will build from this a discussion of the more day-to-day implications of this perspective change. More specifically, I will discuss how nature is the centering piece of our lives; how we each adopted more mindful and in-the-moment approach to life; how we live more consciously and with an intrinsically driven environmental ethic; how purpose and meaning are more consciously sought.
Nature as the centering piece of our lives. First and foremost, nature took centre stage as the source and touchstone for our values, choices and outlook on life. This was a major change for all of us, whether it be that we were returning to this perspective or coming to it for the first time. The beliefs outlined in the descriptive definition of nature at the beginning of this chapter provided a good overview of our guiding thoughts about nature. These beliefs actualize in the kind of thoughts Naomi shared about the place of nature in her life.

Oh I think in the past nature was just um something that was there you know occasionally you’d be out in it, now it’s more of a necessity. I find that I need to um, you know find it, be part of it, absorb it, um, every chance I get….This is the way it’s meant to be, we’re supposed to be honouring nature, we’re not supposed to be building and cutting things down and um you know, it’s we don’t honour it enough and I was you know guilty of that. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

The result of this belief in the need to honour nature and the feeling of needing to be a part of nature, be in nature, and continually be aware of our interconnectedness with nature had implications for our everyday lives.

Living more consciously and with an intrinsically driven environmental ethic.

Each of us made outward lifestyle changes and also experienced inward shifts in our conscious awareness of our lifestyles, consumer patterns and the many ways in which our choices may impact the environment. There was a general sense of rejection of North American consumerist culture and a movement to minimize our individual consumption of goods, each of us desiring a more simple, less cluttered lifestyle. We all carried with us an awareness of our interconnection with nature and thus we were continually considering how our consumer choices (i.e. cars, food, housing, clothing etc.) may impact the environment. This kind of conscious living and environmental ethic developed out of
our transformative experiences with nature and stood in sometimes stark contrast to the lifestyles and values we held before.

Oh you know that all the stuff doesn’t matter. Um You know I truly believe now that it’s all um, it’s all just extra stuff, it’s just all about um you know yourself, what your spirit is putting out there, your contentment, all of the other um stuff is just stuff.

Emily – What would some of that stuff be?
Naomi – Oh um, clothes, cars, um, even jobs to a certain extent, you know anything that takes you away from um honouring what’s important you know and there’s so much that isn’t [important]. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

I make conscious decisions about what I buy, what I eat, what I drive and what I wear and I’m even trying to be more conscious about the materials that I’m buying and where the clothing comes from and it’s just kind of a lifestyle that Chris and I are getting into ... I think it’s all a product of this transformation that we’ve gone through and it’s kind of been a cascade and it’s not the kind of thing that you wake up one morning and I’m going to wear all natural fabrics, and this, and fair trade, and this that and the other thing but it’s just kind of something that becomes your lifestyle. (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

In general, our outlook on life includes much more critical consideration and questioning of societal expectations, cultural norms and the choices that we are able to make within those, or outside of those structures. Naomi shared that she’s coming to recognize the social expectations led her to dye her greying hair brown, a choice she is reconsidering. Quinn said in general terms that “I’m always asking questioning [pause] and learning. I’ve definitely become a more inquisitive person” (Personal Transformation Interview with Quinn). Quinn, like all of us, now engages with his day to day life with a more critical eye, thinking and asking himself questions about his own behaviours, assumptions and interpretations of his social world.

A more mindful, in-the-moment approach to life. We not only became more conscious in terms of the environmental impact of our lifestyle choices but also in terms
of what we truly wanted in life. Again, our experiences in nature were the guiding forces behind these transformations. We purposely sought to cut out clutter and unnecessary noise and influence such as television and radio. In those places we inserted interactions with and time to appreciate nature. We now value a lifestyle that gives us the physical and mental space to step away from our busy lives to consider what we really want and need.

With this redirection we each managed to carve out either entirely new lives or different ways of structuring and approaching how we experience our lives. Quinn meditates or drums everyday before he goes to sleep. He works in an industry that keeps him out in nature and spends his non-work time engaged in photography and other creative endeavours that serve to spread environmental awareness. Maya surrounds herself with nature in her home life. She finds opportunities to expand her sense of connectedness to nature and people alike and is always considering ways to bring those feelings and beliefs into all corners of her life. Naomi gets up early every morning to meditate, looking out at her favourite Oak tree. She leaves for work earlier and usually drives in silence so that she can appreciate her farm land surroundings and feel a sense of calm before her chaotic workday begins. Although Naomi remains in the same career, her sense of possibilities for herself have expanded beyond her current life scenario and she hopes to find a way to integrate her eco-awareness and values throughout her life. Adele listens to audio recordings of nature at work or finds moments to step out into nature when she is feeling stressed. She is dedicated to her work as a biologist but has a more holistic and deeper level of understanding for and appreciation of the importance of understanding and valuing the natural world. I continue to seek out and discover ways in
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which I can experience and share with others my sense of connection to and valuing of all of nature. During the course of my M.A., I have filled my house with plants and began growing herbs and vegetables in an effort to bring nature to my city-bound, computer-centered existence and being with and caring for those plants helps me to slow down and come close to that feeling of pause. I have not discovered my precise path in life, but I now have a clear sense of the kind of life I want, one that is close to nature, and that fosters an in-the-moment state of mind. These are some small examples of how each of us in our own way now consciously lives with an awareness of the choices we can make every day to create a lived experience and lifestyle that is healthy for us and connected to the environment.

*Purpose and meaning are more consciously sought.* We have all come to a belief in and need to seek and actualize our respective true purposes that contribute to a greater good. We had all experienced moving through life as though we did not have meaningful choices to make. Going to school, getting a job, and creating a family were some of the social norms through which we had somewhat unconsciously progressed. After our transformative experiences with nature we each in our own way came to realizations of the changes that needed to be made in order to live a life that is in line with our gifts and purpose in this lifetime. Quinn, Maya and Adele expressed that they had a fairly clear idea of what their purpose is and the ways in which they will make meaning of their lives. Naomi and I expressed that we were more in the midst of discovering our gifts and purpose, but were adamant that it was important, indeed vital to having a meaningful life to define and pursue a purpose that is true to our self and positively contributes to the
world. Again, this is inspired by and grounded in our beliefs about and lessons learned from nature.

**Self**

Our sense of self, of who we are, and what we are capable of was completely reoriented as a result of our transformative experiences with nature-based leisure. We each identified a sense of self that was perceived to be true and was felt to emanate from within. We each felt confidently calm and self-assured. We were able to make decisions and take leadership positions and/or unpopular positions amongst our family and peers without worry or hesitation. Additionally, we each came to desire opportunities for personal expression, and began to explore and express our creative potential.

*A sense of self that emanates from within.* Prior to our transformative experiences with nature, all of us had primarily understood who we were only in relation to other people or external expectations. Through our nature-based leisure experiences we were able to experience and identify our true self, natural self, or authentic self. We each had our own language around this, but the overarching idea was that the self with whom we had identified prior to our transformative experience, was a self that had somehow been externally or socially imposed on us. We became acutely aware of how our families, friends and encounters with society in general had shaped, and perhaps even created the person we had been for so much of our lives. Our transformative experiences with nature however brought us to to recognize a sense of self that emanated from within. The sentiment across all co-researchers was now that “I’m no longer the person that everyone wants me to be, I’m the person I want to be” (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele).
Confidently calm and self-assured. Having identified this sense of self that emanated from within, instilled in all co-researchers a renewed confidence, and feeling of self-assurance but without arrogance or defensiveness, it is a calm kind of security in who we are and the beliefs we hold. We all expressed the feeling of being comfortable in being perceived as different. We each had a new found feeling of confidence to express our opinions and beliefs, knowing that they may be outside of the perceived norms and beliefs of others in our families, social groups and even culture. We all discovered a depth of courage and belief in our ability and potential in terms of emotional, physical and spiritual strength. We found ourselves to be more likely to take on leadership positions, resist oppressive and personally incongruent social expectations. We found ourselves to be less socially malleable, able to stay true to our self, our beliefs and values without giving into social pressure and expectations.

[It’s] about being able to dig inside and do what needs to be done. I still don’t know, you know I mean I haven’t tested those limits but it’s about knowing that I can probably be in just about any situation and make it through – I know there’s a limit there but you know what I mean – there’s a confidence there in my strength and in my ability. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

I’m confident, it’s more like I don’t have that sense of insecurity about being the eco-geek, like I can be put in any situation and not really care about what people are thinking...it’s strengthened my view of the world and of society and everything from environmental and ecological issues to my job to family life. (Personal Transformation Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

Creative exploration and expression. All co-researchers expressed that our curiosity about our creative potential was an unexpected development and that our respective discovery of creative potential and talent was an especially welcomed outcome. Prior to our transformative experiences, we were all fairly conservative,
artistically inexpressive, and otherwise creatively deficient. None of us had been encouraged to creatively explore or express ourselves during our childhood and this continued throughout adulthood. The freedom we felt within nature to explore and express ourselves coupled with the colour and inspiring beauty of nature marked the beginning of our opening to our own creativity.

Oh you know something that we really didn’t touch on was creativity, that you know through all of my work and stuff, that’s another part of my life and a lot of people won’t acknowledge in this world we’re in. You know people don’t appreciate and explore their creative, artistic person and that’s something that I try to do now, and that I do as a result of that transformative experience. (Personal Transformation Interview with Naomi, emphasis added)

I’ve always known or I’ve always found the guitar like fascinating like watching people playing, and now I’m like: “I want to learn how to play, I want to learn how to push my limits” and kind of see how far [I can go]. I want to be the better person you know, see how creative I actually am. (Nature Interview with Adele, emphasis added)

The creativity of co-researchers can be seen in the artefacts presented in artistic form in earlier pages but can also be appreciated in the ways in which we have begun to re-shape and re-consider our lives and direction.

Relationships

Relationships were not as overtly affected as our outlook and sense of self.

However, there was a consistency in the way in which our perspective on and approach to relationships evolved. Our more consistent and centered sense of self influenced the way we engaged in our relationships, allowing us to maintain a more consistent way of being – as was discussed in terms of confidence. Additionally we witnessed the fading of relationships which were no longer in line with our beliefs and the strengthening of relationships with people who were more congruent with us. There was not a severing of
old relationships, there was no judgement of relationships which faded, but instead a simple conscious awareness of the difference in life paths and (current) values. This lack of judgement for others who were different was part of an enhanced appreciation for other people, their life circumstances and life perspectives.

Everyone has their story and everyone is coming from a different place on any given day and I just hope to be more aware and less quick to jump to those “it’s not going my way, oh my god” it’s not always going to go my way, it’s not always going to be about me. (Nature Interview with Naomi)

In intimate or close relationships such as with family members or other loved ones, there was more of a sense of autonomy and a healthier perspective on the boundaries between people while appreciating those connections at the same time. Once again, nature was part of this change, as Maya shared, “Nature teaches me about relationships, how to create supportive relationships” (Nature Interview with Maya). Co-researchers were transformed in many ways by our respective nature-based leisure experiences and the changes we have experienced thus far were all tied back to the lessons and inspirations provided by our contact with nature. Our sense of self, outlook on life, and relationships were all shifted in ways which empowered us, expanded our sense of personal possibility, grounded us in an inner knowing and call to humanity/awareness, and opened us to other ways of perceiving our world. The accounts of our transformative outcomes discussed above, are the changes that we had actualized or realized at the time of the interviews. However we all also recognized that learning and development resulting from our nature-based leisure experiences would continue to unfold and inspire our evolution.
A Diverse Yet Similar Set of Experiences and Perspectives

Clearly each co-researcher has their own unique story, perspective and life context that brings colour, dimension and great variability to our experiences and transformative outcomes. However, there is also a great deal of similarity and shared understanding across our experiences, feelings, and perspectives. It is those shared understandings, feelings and perspectives that are the characteristics of the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. In the following chapter these individual depictions of the phenomenon, and collective understandings of nature and personal transformation are brought together in a creative synthesis including a composite depiction of the essence.
CHAPTER 6

Chapters 4 and 5 have provided a clear picture of the individual co-researchers and their respective experiences as well as the collective understandings, outcomes, and definitions that have been presented thus far. These previous chapters have presented the findings in a uniquely heuristic manner and this chapter will continue that practice. The first section of Chapter 6 is concerned with the culminating piece of heuristic research - the *creative synthesis* - a three-part representation and consideration of the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. Part one of this first section is a painting, part two a poem and finally part three is the *composite depiction*, a descriptive, narrative account of the collective understanding of the essence. The second section of Chapter 6 is a more critical examination of the findings and includes: a discussion of the place of the findings within existing literature; possible considerations and implications for practice, future research and theory; and finally the limitations and challenges of this research. Before delving into the actual findings and discussions thereof, I will first provide the reader with a more thorough description of what is to come in the two sections of this chapter as well as a more detailed explanation of the rationale behind the format and presentation of findings and discussions.

The first section is called the *creative synthesis*, the culminating piece of heuristic research. Without a doubt the creative synthesis is outside of the usual means of presenting qualitative research findings, but is clearly within the heuristic tradition (Moustakas, 1990). This creative synthesis adheres to the heuristic tradition by including artwork and a poem as a means of expressing the meaning of the essence of the phenomenon. These two forms combine with the *composite depiction*, a narrative,
The *composite depiction* is meant to capture the feelings, experiences, perceptions, understandings and tacit knowing of our collective encounters with the phenomenon. Individual co-researcher voices disappear and all of the details and descriptions depicted in Chapter 5 come together in a *collective narrative voice* woven together by myself, the primary co-researcher. The *composite depiction* is void of individual voices in order to highlight the essence as a collective understanding and to avoid distracting from the collective narrative voice. This is consistent with the narrative, descriptive method usually employed for creating the composite depiction of the essence (Moustakas, 1990). There are occasions when heuristic researchers choose instead to present the composite depiction as a series of quotes, but as discussed in regards to individual depictions of the essence in Chapter 5, due to the complexity and interest in an intersection, this kind of approach would have been problematic. There is a great deal of flexibility in the manner of presenting heuristic research and for this research project, I chose to combine the artistic pieces (poem and painting) with the composite depiction.

To arrive at the composite depiction I considered all of the experiences and accounts of individual co-researchers as well as the collective understandings of nature, personal transformation and our transformative outcomes. The resulting *composite depiction* weaves together our stories, understandings and experiences, capturing the essence of what it meant to the five of us to be personally transformed by a nature-based leisure experience. The composite depiction provides a narrative account of how the essence of the phenomenon centres on the concept of authenticity. The composite
depiction provides a depth of description about the meaning of authenticity in this context and the reader will find this section rich with metaphors inspired by co-researcher stories. The construction of the composite depiction was guided by the collective understandings of nature, personal transformation and transformative outcomes as presented in Chapter 5, as well as by the individual depictions of the essence. The language and flow of the composite depiction developed organically and the co-researchers agreed with this final presentation and representation of the essence of the phenomenon.

I am so impressed and touched with your findings. Although some of the experiences were not mine, they were mine. I am in awe of how our experiences and feelings are the same. As I've re-read The Essence many times I continue to be brought to awareness. (personal communication, Naomi)

Naomi's reflection on the essence attests to the tacit understanding and feeling of the phenomenon having been successfully captured. According to three of the four co-researchers who chose to participate in the member check process, it seems that the composite depiction does in fact represent a collective understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. The responses of the three co-researchers who reviewed the composite depiction (the essence) were provided in Chapter 3.

The composite depiction is the last part of the creative synthesis, thus situating the reader to consider the composite depiction within the second section, a more critical examination of the findings. I have chosen to present the composite depiction as the last part of the creative synthesis but have outlined it here first in order to give the reader an understanding of where the creative synthesis is headed. Leading to the composite
depiction is a painting and then a poem. By building toward the composite depiction with the painting and poem, I am attempting to give the reader the opportunity to consider the meaning of the essence through symbolism and interpretation based on their readings of previous chapters. I believe that part of the challenge of heuristic presentation of findings is not only in presenting the essence as described and experienced by co-researchers but also in inviting the reader into that world of feeling and tacit knowing. Thus a reasonable way to encourage this kind of knowing and consideration of the essence is through creative artistic pieces which both represent the essence and inspire reader reflection and feeling.

The second section of Chapter 6 is a more critical examination of the findings of this heuristic research project. This second section begins by considering the collective understanding of the essence of the phenomenon within existing literature for an examination of how the findings came together to create the essence and why understanding that is important. Next, conclusions and implications are discussed in terms of how this research may contribute to both theoretical and pragmatic interests. Finally, this research and its findings are discussed in terms of challenges and limitations.

The Essence: A Creative Synthesis

This section presents the three parts of the creative synthesis. It begins with the painting mentioned above, followed by the poem by David Whyte (1997), and closes with the capstone piece of this research, the composite depiction of the essence.

I created the painting below to give colour and form to the essence presented within the composite depiction. This painting represents the sense of oneness with, and profound connection to nature, with a woman seemingly part of the tree, as the tree, or within the tree. She is at once connected to nature and her own form within it. As a naked form she is raw or organic, she is her authentic or "pure" form, free of social cloaks and cultural robes. With her arms open and outstretched, she seems celebratory,
victorious and perhaps joyfully free. She is present in her moment with nature, intricately grounded to the earth, as roots of a tree, actualizing her authentic self. Nature is all around her, and in her but remains unchanged by her self discovery and actualization. Nature remains to simply be what it is, providing space, context and relatedness for her experience. The painting represents the freedom to express and explore ourselves and to celebrate that being. It represents losing ourselves within all of nature and finding ourselves at the same time in the same way.
I came to paint this picture as an expression of the ways in which I envision what it means in one-dimensional form to be one with nature and yet discovering an autonomous self that is uniquely and indescribably personal. I used a yellow and white background because to me those colours represent light, both sunlight and a light within. I chose typical summertime colours of green and brown for the tree because the tree is healthy and in its prime season, showing its colour and health. The woman with(in) the tree is in white and blue. I chose white for the woman because white gives an ethereal, non-permanent feeling of the spirit of a person, not a solid, set image of a person. Blue makes me think of water, and by having lines of water helping to define the woman's form it dually represents how nature runs through ourselves but also interconnects the water of the woman with the water as it moves up the tree to nourish it.

The second part of the creative synthesis is a poem by David Whyte (1997). I was first introduced to this poem on a canoe trip during the "incubation" phase of data analysis. This poem struck me as being particularly moving at that time and also seemed to represent what co-researchers and I had experienced. I read through other books of poetry such as the works of Mary Oliver, and other creative accounts of the natural world in short stories and essays. In the end, I found myself coming back to Working Together by David Whyte. In my understanding, this poem is about how people shape, influence, and interpret nature, and in turn how nature shapes, influences, and inspires self-interpretation. What I appreciate most about this poem is that there is an elusive, tacit knowledge floating amongst Whyte's words, a void in which there is room to input our own imaginings of what it precisely means to shape and be shaped by nature. This is part of the reason I chose this poem, because it leaves room for interpretation of the essence.
We shape our self
to fit this world
and by the world
are shaped again.
The visible
and the invisible
working together
in common cause,
to produce
the miraculous.

I am thinking of the way
the intangible air

passed at speed
round a shaped wing
easily
holds our weight.

So may we, in this life
trust
to those elements
we have yet to see
or imagine,
and look for the true
shape of our own self,
by forming it well
to the great
intangibles about us.

Working Together
By David Whyte (1997)
**Composite Depiction**

The essence of the intersection of nature-based leisure and personal transformation lies in the convergence of the lived experience of *authenticity*. The physical environment of nature was perceived and experienced to be a space and context of authenticity, a model of the definitive truth and purpose of being, a purpose that emanates from within and benefits all in harmonious reciprocity. Nature-based leisure was uniquely situated, bringing together this perceived context of authenticity – nature – and the strengths of leisure. In this context, leisure was experienced as engagement in a personally meaningful, exploratory, and ultimately expressive activity within a perceived context of freedom (Kleiber, 1999) that allowed for disengagement from everyday life and experiences of *pause* (May, 1981) or *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Co-researchers’ experiences of themselves within these contexts inspired awareness and insights that are best summed up as the experience of awakening to one’s true self, or as Aristotle described it, the identification of one’s “‘daimon,’ the evocative true nature of a person...this is who I really am” (Kleiber, p. 97). The following pages will discuss in greater detail, the nuances of each of the three dimensions of this essence: nature, nature-based leisure, and personal transformation.

*Nature: an authentic space.* Each co-researcher experienced and understood nature to be an inherently *authentic* or truthful place, space, or entity. “Nature simply is what it is” was a sentiment articulated by each of us. Nature was perceived to express and manifest its purpose just as it needed to, regardless of external human desires, hopes or fears. This space of nature – being true and free in itself – provided us with a context
and lived experience of truth and freedom. As such, nature as an authentic space provided both a model of authenticity as well as a perceived lived context of authenticity.

Nature was a model of authenticity, demonstrating truth with every tree, tortoise and tornado. I employ the metaphor of the tree to demonstrate co-researchers’ perspective of nature’s embodiment of authenticity. The tree is the tree, the tree does not try to be a dog or impress a river. The tree stands tall and strong, rooted deeply into the earth and by simply living out it’s truth of purpose or “being what it is”, it provides shade, shelter, stability, food, and oxygen during it’s life; nitrogen, nutrients, and sustenance for the earth in it’s death. It responds with grace and beauty between the seasons: awakening, blossoming, bearing new life and potential, demonstrating its full creative expression in colour and form, and then releasing its creation and moving into a space of quiet and peaceful regeneration. The tree, as with all manifestations of nature, is embodying its truth of purpose and thus serves as a model of actualized authenticity. The tree knows it is a tree, not confusing itself for a flower. The tree serve’s its purpose selflessly and with grace, its purpose uncompromised, unaffected by the changes around it, only evolving and moving with the seasons and the harmonious (or harsh) rhythm of life. The tree does not ask the birds to sing a different song or the child to climb down from its branches. The tree stands as it is, providing what it can without worrying about being more, needing more or wanting differently from itself or others. Nature, as an intricate system of countless examples of actualized authenticity culminates in a space of authenticity; a space which, as perceived by co-researchers, was a context to experience authenticity first hand.
Within this perceived context and lived space of authenticity, co-researchers recognized and appreciated the absence of the social voices and external messages that usually inundated them on a daily basis. This quiet of nature allowed for an appreciation of this unique lived context of the authenticity that nature modeled. They felt free to simply be, to let down their guards and put away their masks, to shake off the oppressive cloaks of perceived external expectations, assumptions and influences. They were opened to their full colour and creative potential that had lay dormant under fear and self-uncertainty. They felt safe to begin to explore their own true passions and intrinsically driven purpose. Nature was a space which was felt to safely hold them, and nurture them, showing them the beautiful simplicity of authenticity, and asking only that they be whoever they truly are.

*Nature-based leisure: an authentic experience.* Nature was a perceived context of authenticity, and leisure – in its ideal form – is an exploration and expression of authenticity (Kleiber, 1999). Leisure is something that is experienced within a context of perceived freedom, when one may disengage from the usual roles, responsibilities and tasks, and engage with a novel and/or preferred experience that expresses or expands one’s sense of self. Furthermore, within nature-based leisure the types of experiences, skills, journeys, adventures, engagements and disengagements inherent to nature-based leisure were all perceived to be authentically meaningful and purposeful.

Swimming in a pool, meditating at home, going for a run, or knitting a scarf are all valid leisure experiences. However, depending on the context, they may all succumb to perceptions of being contrived, superficially motivated, without real, tangible purpose or meaning. In regard to the nature-based leisure experiences of co-researchers however,
Purposeful and meaningful leisure was at the heart of their perceptions of their experiences. Exercise was a flowing outcome of paddling to one’s favourite island or beach and personal strength took on new meaning while a person moved across portages or sat with the fear and anxiety of isolation. Meditation was a spontaneous experience of pause amongst the groaning of ancient pines. The beauty and/or harsh power of nature inspired creative expression in the form of journaling, singing, story telling, and ideas for projects at home to remember the experiences of self and place. Swimming was an adventurous exploration of worlds under the water or a feeling of sublime oneness, floating naked in the warm sun. Making fire was a necessity for cooking or ceremony, trusting one’s self a requirement for a joyful horseback ride.

Co-researchers not only felt that they were living-out an authentic experience, but that their companions in nature-based leisure were also supporting and appreciative of nature’s container of safety and authenticity, and that the guides embodied the spirit of authenticity, living with passion and intrinsic purpose. Within this social environment, co-researchers found solace and (un)spoken support for their self explorations and their relinquishing of usual roles and ways of being.

Nature-based leisure was a context, activity, and social environment that was personally meaningful, expressive of self, perceived as a context of freedom, and ultimately deemed to be a lived experience of authenticity. It is within this converging experience of self, nature, and leisure that a (re)new(ed) recognition of one’s authentic self was realized.

*Personal transformation: a call to authenticity.* Co-researchers did not necessarily transform immediately within their nature-based leisure experiences, for transformations
required changes in behaviour. Instead co-researchers would encounter moments of feeling that “this is who I really am”. Sometimes those feeling would carry with them into their daily life but much of the time it incubated in their mind, as they began to realign their perspectives and construct personal meaning of the experience. Eventually their behaviours and outlook realigned and they stepped into actualizing their authentic self. This ebbing and flowing of transformation is much like the seasonal patterns of nature, where there are times of expression and action, and those of dormancy and regeneration. The transformative process moved co-researchers in this cyclical manner, an intrinsically driven call to humanity, an upward spiral of self-discovery, an unfolding of being, culminating in the actualization of an authentic self.

An “ah-ha” moment of clarity could take any form. It could be the profound realization of the interconnection of all living beings and one’s small place within that extraordinary thing called nature – perhaps while watching a sunset or traversing a pass on horseback. It could be simply appreciating the sounds of wind and water moving around you and recognizing how deeply you cherish the opportunity to hear only the voice that comes from within. It could also be drinking a mug of hot chocolate made with real chocolate bars and butter and finally realizing that one’s body really is the life source and that this is not just a treat but way to care for one’s self and ensure there is enough fuel to stave off the cold on a mid-winter backcountry expedition.

Regardless of the realization, co-researchers were opened to a new perspective, an awareness which could not be ignored, an awareness that made them hungry for deeper explorations and understandings of themselves. They described a tacit knowing that a different self, a true, authentic self, had been smothered under societal expectations, role
responsibilities, career titles, relationships, fears, and pre-occupations with who they thought they should be. All co-researchers have come to a place of recognizing that their authentic self emanates from within, and that labels and status based on relationships (mother, brother, wife), career (rough neck, helper, scientist), financial acquisition, or otherwise were personally irrelevant. They came to live by a moral code that was congruent with their valuing of authenticity as demonstrated by nature. They now choose to live consciously, aware of their impact on all of nature including humans. They seek to uncover and actualize their true purpose and perhaps untapped gifts and to live a life driven by passion and meaning. They have greater appreciation for the small miracles and joys of life and, in re-aligning their priorities, find they have greater life satisfaction and more grounded relationships.

It would be near impossible to name every which way that co-researchers lives and sense of self have been transformed. What can be said is that all co-researchers have been awakened to an awareness of their authentic self and have embraced the journey of cyclical awakening and actualizing of that authentic self. This journey continues to take us in mind, body and spirit, back to nature, back to an authentic place where we (re)discover our authentic self all over again.

The next section of Chapter 6 includes three sections: first, a discussion of the essence (as described above) within existing literature; second, a discussion of conclusions and implications; and third, a discussion of challenges and limitations.

*Embedding the Lived Essence within Literature*

There are three main points of interest in discussing this lived essence of authenticity: nature as an authentic space and context; leisure as an authentic experience
and personal transformation as a call to personal authenticity. There are many varied and large bodies of literature which could be explored in relation to each one of these three areas but for the purpose of this discussion, literature has been selected because of how it contributes to an understanding of the essence of authenticity.

*Nature: An Authentic Space and Context*

There are innumerable ways of understanding human-nature relations. Culture, era, lived landscape, social values, and religious beliefs are just some of the factors which may influence an individual’s perspective on their perceived relationship to the natural world. Additionally, different theoretical paradigms further complexify the number and ways of understanding human experiences with particular settings in nature. For this research, the perspective of central importance was the belief in and experience of nature as an authentic space and context. This belief and experience intersected directly with the ensuing experience of an authentic self, and authentic leisure experience. Sense of place and geo-piety will be the two theoretical constructs used to discuss nature as an authentic space and context. At this time it is important to recognize that although co-researchers’ relations with nature ranged from the spiritual to the secular, their ultimate sense of connection, belonging and perception of nature as an authentic space were held in common (this finding is further discussed in the section on conclusions and implications). It is the commonality of perceived authenticity that is of utmost importance in this research. Before moving into a detailed discussion of sense of place and geopiety it is important to address co-researchers’ progression to perceived authenticity of nature by way of traditional views of domination over nature, romanticism of nature as an empty space, and pristine space separate from human-kind.
For the most part co-researchers began their experiences in nature from the perspective that they were other-than, separate from, and even dominant over nature. Our first accounts of nature-based leisure were preoccupied with demonstrating our ability to survive (nature as foe), feeling powerful or strong (notions of dominance over nature), feeling frightened or out-of-place (nature as other-than) or being in profound awe of wilderness spaces and yet unaware of and less interested in nature in non-pristine settings. All of these initial feelings and perspectives have a common thread of nature being “other-than” us, a viewpoint of nature being different, separate, foreign and even unrelated.

The perspectives discussed above are fairly typical of a North American relation to nature that deems nature as not just other-than, but even as sub-human, or exotic in the most demeaning of ways (Fiske, 2005; Rutlege, 1993). Although I think it would be unfair to say that any of us consciously considered nature to be “below” us, we certainly did not demonstrate a consistent appreciation and consideration for nature’s well-being earlier in our nature-based leisure experiences. Based on the accounts of all co-researchers, all of us progressed beyond this typical North American paradigm of othering nature. Along this progress we discussed notions of considering nature to be fragile and in needing of protection. This kind of perspective is consistent with a romantic feminization of nature which serves to define nature in terms of stereotypical feminine characteristics of fragility, giving-life, and needing protection (Heller, 1993). Such perspectives have been identified as obstacles to experiences in nature having lasting and meaningful impacts on people, especially in terms of evolving environmental stewardship (Haluza-Delay, 2001). In the case of co-researchers experiences however, these first
encounters with nature perceived as other-than were only the beginning sentiments. As co-researchers spent more time in nature – especially in specific places – their perspective on, and relationship to, nature evolved towards authenticity. In terms of defining our progression towards an internally motivated environmental ethic and stewardship, it appears that being consciously aware of and appreciative of nature at all times and in all settings was as equally important as developing a relationship with a specific place.

Whether co-researchers had one prolonged experience, repeated visits to one place, or multiple encounters with varied spaces perceived as nature/natural, it appeared that they came to develop what many have described as a sense of place (Tuan, 1974, 1977). Co-researchers created environmental meanings and attached them to the physical settings they encountered. Thus, places became meaningful through emotions and values that emerged from their direct experiences in nature. These affective dimensions were described as feelings of belongingness, connectedness, or of being “at home” in a particular setting or settings. These kinds of descriptors are in line with a variety of place-based theories:

A variety of theoretical positions and frameworks have been advanced to account for how places become “places” - in other words, how places become meaningful. One widely used definition of place has been Relph’s conception of place as a focus of human intention: “Places in existential space can therefore be understood as centers of meaning, or focuses of intention and purpose” (1976, p. 22). Others have accepted this idea that it is people that make places, and that by giving places meaning,
people transform them from amorphous space into defined and bounded places (Tuan, 1977; Williams & Carr, 1993). Hence, these frameworks generally start from a constructivist or transactional perspective, wherein people are the creators of places, and place creation and meaning flow from a continual process of interaction between the person, their social milieu, and the physical setting; this process results in the meanings that are endowed in a place, and thus a sense of place (SOP) that is personally and socially constructed (Case, 1996; Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Stokowski, 2002). Most frameworks accept that a place is a complex concept, whose reality is constructed as people attach meaning to a physical setting in a variety of ways (Low & Altman, 1992; Stedman 2002). (Smaldone, Harris, & Sanyal, 2005, p. 397)

These conceptions of place certainly ring true for the co-researchers’ experiences of nature settings as they progressed from a perception of otherness to a perception of profound connection and respect for a particular setting. This progression in co-researchers’ sense of connection culminated in the perception of there being a definitive truth found in nature. The meanings co-researchers attached to these settings evolved over the progression of their experiences and those meanings culminated in descriptions of all of nature as being an authentic place beyond the particular settings they had encountered. This stood in contrast to the perception of cityscapes or urban areas that were viewed as unnatural, manufactured and thus laden with un-truths and illusions.

The perspective of nature as a place of authenticity ran deeper than simple comparisons of physical spaces seen as natural versus manufactured or “real” versus
illusion. Co-researchers tacitly recognized and identified with the naturalness of landscapes as sacred or in secular terms as being ideally whole. These perspectives of experiences in nature have been described by the language of geopiety:

...geopiety...typically relates to the sense of reverence (pious emotion) evoked by the wonder (or even terror) of the earth in all its diversity (Wright, 1966: 251). Ten years later, Tuan (1976) interpreted the concept of geopiety (geo – earth, land, space and piety – reverence, attachment and hence protection) in terms of exalted reciprocity between man and nature. Tuan postulated that sacred phenomena are those that stand out from the common place and interrupt the routine or mundane. Sacred, according to Tuan, was something that was characterized by apartness, otherworldness or, orderliness and wholeness. Geopiety thus stands for a special complex of relations between man and nature. (Singh, 2005, p. 218)

Interestingly, all co-researchers described a sense of connection to the wholeness of nature regardless of whether they used spiritual or secular/scientific language; the feeling and tacit knowing of their connections were the same. Co-researchers did not see nature as a sacred place apart from themselves. What seemed to be their most profound appreciation of wholeness was the recognition of their place within the entire ecosystem.

Co-researchers’ conception of nature as an authentic place was a constructed notion that evolved. These meanings developed over repeated exposure to nature and culminated in an intensive sense of belonging, wholeness, and unification with the natural world. Co-researchers seemed to dialectically recognize nature as a sacred and authentic space to be honoured. Additionally, they recognized their own interconnection with that
space and thus their own authentic potential. It appears that geopiety and sense of place converged to open co-researchers to the possibility of their own situatedness within the natural world. This awareness was the recognition of an authentic self.

One of the outcomes of this geopious perspective and deep sense of place was an enhanced desire to live in greater harmony with the earth and to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. This outcome would not have been possible had co-researchers not felt some sense of identification with and connection to nature. If their perceptions of otherness, detachment, and romanticization of nature as pristinely empty had continued, they could not have come to experience nature as a lived human context of authenticity. In other words, they realized that they did not have to get back to nature, because they had been an authentic part of it all along. However, it took person-place bonding in natural settings of personal significance for this realization to emerge. This realization has important implications for environmental education.

Haluza-Delay (2001) studied teenage constructions of nature following a 12-day backcountry trip and revealed that they continued to view themselves and their cityscapes as separate from nature. Thus on return to the city, any sense of environmental stewardship that had developed in the pristine emptiness of nature had evaporated as they continued to view themselves and cityscapes as other-than nature. Currie (2006) in her article “Sustainability and Spirituality: A Call to Outdoor Educators” addressed this issue of the need for students to embrace and tacitly feel a connection to nature in order to develop a true environmental ethic. Educators must to be cognizant of the need for students to develop an appreciation for nature that moves them beyond nature as other, empty, and a foreign reality. For true environmental stewardship, individuals need to
move into a space of conscious awareness of the profound sense of interconnection of all life. Without the perception of nature as an authentic (and thus valued) context that is part of a person’s reality there is little hope of him/her developing an environmental ethic that is intrinsically motivated and thus self-sustaining.

Friluftsliv, a Norwegian cultural concept of being with the outdoors or "a way home to the open air" (Henderson, 2001, p. 31) may offer hope as it stands in contrast to North American perspectives on interacting with nature: “this is outdoor recreation with its heart within the land and linked to a tradition of being and learning with the land” (Henderson, 2001, p. 32, emphasis added). A friluftsliv approach to environmental education is in line with the kind of deep connection and valuing of nature that was reported by co-researchers as having awakened them to an environmental ethic.

Friluftsliv has in fact enjoyed a fair amount of recent attention in Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education (Dahle, 2002; Duenkel & Pratt, 2001; Faarland, 2002; Henderson, 2001, 2002; Leirhaug, 2002; Sandell, 2001; Ulstrup, 2001). As Duenkel and Pratt (2001) said:

within the core of every individual there remains some vital connection, some awareness of wild nature, some memory….now it has become so uncommon, or foreign, that we are not even aware of its loss: Enabling people to wake up to what it has been like to live without deep connections to the rest of the natural world is what friluftsliv education is founded upon. (p. 4)
If nothing else, the increasing interest in friluftsliv in Ontario demonstrates the existence of a gap not just in education but in the human relationship to nature and its importance for human development.

Much like the implications for environmental education, co-researchers expressed that their own healing and changed perceptions of self and other only came about when they could identify with their environment. What an authentic environment may look like may vary from person to person whether urban, rural, outdoor, indoor, bowling alley or church and so on. For a person to identify with any environment, for it to be perceived as a relevant, valued, and meaningful dimension of their experience is to strengthen the congruency between how they perceive themselves in that place and their ability to internalize any learning about themselves that may occur.

*Nature-based Leisure: An Authentic Experience*

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate the developmental benefits of leisure experiences. Specifically, leisure affords the opportunity to explore and then express one’s self through experiences that are discovered to be personally meaningful. Additionally, opportunities for *pause* (May, 1981) were at the fore of co-researchers’ accounts of transformative encounters with nature. Pause has often been over shadowed by the developmental potential of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and experiences where challenge and new skill acquisition are of central importance. The leisure dimension of this study’s phenomenon in question provided for an upward spiral of exploration, expression and internalization of the personal meanings of those leisure experiences.

Kleiber (1999) is known for his work on human development and leisure. He said that leisure experiences, as a context of relative freedom, are an ideal place for a person
to explore one’s self outside of the usual roles and responsibilities of daily life.

Furthermore, he suggested that if a person encounters something that deeply resonates with him/her, the characteristics of self that are demonstrated through that pursuit are integrated into the person’s self-theory of his/her identity. Co-researchers described these leisure encounters in terms of recognizing that they are (for example) independent, adventurous or even interconnected with nature. Through their nature-based leisure encounters they were able to explore these concepts and then integrate them into their daily life by perhaps becoming more involved with the environment or being more adventurous in exploring other dimensions of themselves. This exploration of self through leisure led to both expression of discovered characteristics and/or further exploration of something that is personally meaningful.

There has been much attention on flow experiences within leisure research (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Kleiber, 1999; Nakamura, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Privette, 2001), however pause experiences are often overlooked. Flow experiences are focused on the balance of challenge and ability where a person gets lost in the moment, and feels deeply engaged with his/her experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Pause experiences on the other hand are experiences of disengaging and experiencing an absence: “In the pause we wonder, reflect, sense awe, and conceive of eternity. The pause is when we open ourselves for the moment to the concepts of both freedom and destiny” (May, 1981, p. 164). Pause is not just about reflection, which is to know something and think about it, but instead to open one’s self to that which has not been realized, considered or perhaps even experienced. Nature-based leisure naturally provided for these experiences of pause, the scenery and setting
inspiring a sense of awe and wonder while also giving freedom from rush and worry about “what’s next” or social roles and instead just deeply enjoying being in the moment. May (1981) said,

In the person’s life response no longer blindly follows stimulus. There intervenes between the two our human imaginings, reflections, considerations, ponderings. Pause is the prerequisite for wonder. When we don’t pause, when we are perpetually hurrying from one appointment to another, from one “planned activity” to another, we sacrifice the richness of wonder. (p. 167)

It was in those moments of wonder and open reflection where co-researchers expressed coming to their “ah-ha” realizations about themselves, and feeling deeply connected to the world. Thus, the pause aided co-researchers in cognitively integrating and making meaning of their experiences. For while they were disengaged from their everyday lives via leisure, and they were engaged in their leisure experiences, they were also in a way able to at least temporarily disengage or cognitively move beyond the immediate activity and consider a wider scope of how they were experiencing their world in that moment. This is the tension of the pause within leisure, to be disengaged from everyday life, engaged in leisure and yet almost disengaged from the specific activity that provided the defining parameters of the experience. Thus co-researchers were within a cognitive and experiential frame of mind that was neither caught up in an activity, nor preoccupied with other life matters, there were quite literally in an experience of pause in between those two parameters. It could be said that to be that deeply in-the-moment, and in such a high degree of cognitive and experiential freedom is the ultimate experience of leisure.
Regardless of the conceptualization of the experience of the pause, this experience allowed co-researchers to be in a mind space that was open to other possibilities of considering one’s self and environment. For example if they had experienced something which had the potential to expand their sense of self, such as feeling (uniquely) strong and able during a portage and then they come to a beautiful lookout and take a moment to sit and appreciate their surroundings (and perhaps accomplishments) they then have the opportunity to make meaning and better understand what their experiences of feeling strong and able really meant to them. It was also during the pause that appreciation for and identification with nature could occur. Again, it is about having an experience of openness to how one perceives one’s self, one’s environment and the meaning making between self and environment.

Interestingly, May (1981) also talked about the necessity of silence for pause. The appreciation of the silence of nature, as opposed to the inundation of noise and external human-stimuli was something all co-researchers addressed as being a factor in their transformative encounters. Just as pause is an experience of not doing, it is a sensory experience in between the usual human recognitions of sound. In musical terms it may literally be the silence in between notes but in terms of nature May said,

It is in the pause that people learn to listen to silence. We hear an infinite number of sounds that we normally never hear at all – the unending hum and buzz of insects in a quiet summer field, a breeze blowing lightly through the golden hay, a thrush singing in the low bushes beyond the meadow. And we suddenly realize that this is something – the world of
“silence” is populated by a myriad of creatures and a myriad of sounds. (p. 165).

For May, in that lack of sound at least human sound, we may find our “muses”. This concept was echoed by Abram (1996),

Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still need that which is other than ourselves and our own creation...we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human...we must renew our acquaintance with the sensuous world...Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and to navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us. (pp. ix-x)

Thus, nature-based leisure as an inspiring setting usually relatively free from human technology and noise is a context ripe for pause-like experiences which hold the potential for expanded considerations of self and the self in the world. It is precisely these moments that sat at the confluence of experiencing nature as an authentic space and considering one’s authentic self within that place.

*Personal Transformation: A Call to Authenticity*

There are many ways to explain how people construct and understand their sense of self and how it evolves. The language co-researchers used to describe their
transformation were on a continuum between the spiritual and the secular. I have not addressed this difference earlier because regardless of the language used co-researchers’ identification with an authentic self was a shared outcome. DeHoff’s (1998) discussion of psychological and spiritual growth suggests that there are in fact more similarities than differences between psychological and spiritual growth and development. This is in line with what this research ultimately found, that the transformative outcomes were best summed up as the recognition of an authentic self, “this is who I really am”. Aristotle discussed this concept under the name of one’s daimon which Waterman (1990, 1993) expanded upon in discussions of personal expressiveness and Harter (2002) discussed in terms of authenticity. Arriving at this awareness that “this is who I really am” was by way of an upward spiral of turning points or awakenings and behavioural changes inspired by nature-based leisure experiences. Moments of pause within nature, of profound appreciation or sense of connection, or activities that expanded a person’s sense of self and possibility, all served as catalysts for self-reconsideration. As described by co-researchers in Chapter 4, personal transformation was not just a realization but the actualization of that change, of putting that awareness into action.

The (re)discovery and ensuing upward spiral of actualizing an authentic self was at the heart of co-researchers’ transformative experiences. This discovery of one’s true self and the resulting search for ways to actualize and live in accordance with that self is a concept congruent with the Hellenic philosophy of eudaimonism and daimon (Waterman, 1990, 1993).

Eudaimonism is an ethical theory that calls upon people to recognize and live in accordance with the daimon or ‘true self’…daimon refers to those
potentialities of each person, the realization of which represents the greatest fulfillment in living of which each is capable. These include both the potentialities that are shared by all humans by virtue of our common specieshood and those unique potentials that distinguish each individual from all others. The daimon is an ideal in the sense of being an excellence, a perfection toward which one strives and, hence, it can give meaning and direction to one’s life. The efforts a person makes to live in accordance with the daimon, to realize those potentials, can be said to be personally expressive. (Waterman, 1990, p. 52)

For co-researchers, their true self was a self that emanated from within, a self that was defined beyond the social influences, roles and external voices. Within a moment of pause in nature, co-researchers recognized two divergent selves, a false self and an authentic self. Harter (2002) said “the false self is experienced as socially implanted against one’s will, and as such it feels foreign” (p. 383). Co-researchers described such a moment of tacit recognition of an authentic self that stood in stark contrast to the version of themselves that they now recognized as false or inauthentic. From this point of realization co-researchers’ upward spiral to better understand and actualize that authentic self – or achieve eudaimonia – began.

Nature became a special place for co-researchers to experience themselves as it was perceived to be free of limiting social expectations and rich with possibilities to explore and enact dimensions of self not yet understood or encountered. Harter (2002) agreed that relative freedom from limiting or coercive social settings is important in recognizing and actualizing one’s true (or good) self for she said, “the essence of the
naturally good human being was corrupted by socioenvironmental conditions, sentiments that found their way into the works of Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, and Carl Rogers” (p. 383). Furthermore, the sense of connectedness, belonging, acceptance and freedom within co-researchers interactions with nature are the very characteristics that Harter suggested are necessary for the development of a true, healthy self.

The deepest sense of a true self is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to growth within the relationship. Mutual empathy is the cornerstone of this perspective (see Batson, Ahmad, Bishner, & Tsang, this volume). Genuine empathic exchange and relatedness bring clarity and authenticity to the self. (2002, p. 389)

Thus, if nature is considered as the “other” in these relationships – which was how co-researchers described their interactions – then nature certainly fulfills this perspective for the development of a true self, nature is the genuine empathic other.

This is not to say that an authentic self is a “unitary self,” but is instead a conscious self, more aware of what feels true and personally congruent versus a self that is unconsciously changing with external demands and pressures. Clark and Dirkx (2000), in a dialogue on adult learning expressed this point as not “asking a fish if it knows it’s in water....[but] to realize they are surrounded by water...That is, they are immersed within a particular view of the self that shapes and informs their ways of thinking” (p. 104). Co-researchers all expressed this as being aware of themselves grounded in the sense of self that they experience in nature and then when they are in other situations, being grounded by that belief in their interconnection with all of life and their values around that concept. Their authentic self is thus a floating concept that evolves, but evolves grounded in the
awareness of where it is situated in relation to/with authentic nature instead of being unconscious of what is determining their defining sense of who they are.

All co-researchers expressed the necessity of being proactive and seeking to further understand and actualize this authentic self or daimon. They purposefully either sought out more experiences in nature to further explore this other and truer version of self, or they began to immediately implement changes in their lives. For all co-researchers these changes have been gradual, perhaps going home and giving away all the clothes that seemed excessive, unnecessary and inexpressive of who they really are; it may have been deciding to no longer watch television; it may also have been making the decision to pursue a new path or end a relationship. As Kleiber (1999) described it, once an authentic self has been realized, development of “authenticity is conditioned in several ways: (1) by finding and responding to one’s inner characteristics and potentials; (2) by behaving “naturally” as opposed to “unnaturally”; and (3) by establishing a level of comfort or “fit” with the immediate environment” (p. 97). This is precisely how co-researchers described the enactment of their authentic self, finding ways of expressing themselves and behaving in ways that were congruent with that authentic self. All co-researchers spoke of discovering creative abilities they had never tapped into prior to their realization of this authentic self. It seems that the authentic self fostered confidence to enact changes and curiosity to further explore and express the unfolding dimensions of themselves. This concept of the discovery of personal creativity is further discussed within conclusions and implications.

The perspective presented in this study of personal transformation being an active and purposeful process of actualizing an authentic self is unique in that it is within a
positive life context. Oftentimes personal transformation is described in terms of reactive unconscious movement away from an undesired self instead of purposeful and conscious movement towards a desired self. The majority of literature on transformative experiences is usually discussed in relation to a traumatic life event such as spinal cord injury and the resulting changes are seen as being “forced” upon the person (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Kleiber et al., 2002; Park & Helgeson, 2006). This research however, suggests that people not only recognize and then move towards a desired authentic self, but that they purposefully seek out ways to do so, inspired by positive as well as negative life experiences. This more positive outlook on the potential for human development is more in line with positive psychology and the desire to better understand positive life experiences, well-being and the attainment of Authentic Happiness, the namesake of Seligman’s (2002) book on positive psychology.

Kleiber (1999) discussed the idea that leisure may be generative of development, especially in terms of normative development, giving people a context which helps them in moving between age-related developmental stages. Leisure is inherently intrinsically motivated and so the argument goes that developmental outcomes of leisure experiences are at least partially self-directed. This research certainly attests to this concept of leisure being generative of development and also intrinsically motivated. The position could be taken that in some cases co-researchers were in fact experiencing some degree of normative, age-related development. However, the extent to which the leisure experience reshaped our sense of self, outlook on life and relationships suggests that we did in fact experience non-normative development, as our development transcended life-stage related changes. Again, these changes are within a context of positive life experiences.
and as such supports the notion that leisure is a somewhat unique and important developmental context. This notion of leisure inspiring and generating normative or non-normative development would be of interest to leisure practitioners, therapists and educators who all have a vested interest in encouraging, fostering and providing for developmental experiences.

This section has addressed the ways in which the essence can be understood within the context of existing literature. By providing this discussion including some literature through which the essence can be illuminated and considered I was intending to provide grounding for the narrative, descriptive account of the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. From this point, I will move on to discussing the most pressing conclusions and implications of this research.

Conclusions and Implications

In the above discussion of the essence of the phenomenon within existing literature, I only briefly alluded to future implications and conclusions of this research. In the following paragraphs I will discuss in greater detail the eight major contributions of this research and how these may potentially inform research and practice; the effective use of artefacts; and how the interview process was a meaning making experience.

The Eight Major Contributions

Authenticity. As described in detail in earlier sections, authenticity is the centering piece of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. Nature happened to be perceived as an authentic space and context by the co-researchers of this study, and that perception of authenticity is what opened us to our transformations. An authentic
space may be a museum for one person, a farmers market for another or a school for yet another. One important message to take home from this research is that context is of central importance to a person's ability (and perhaps willingness) to make meaning of his/her experiences and to thus begin the upward spiralling toward self-actualization. The experiences of the co-researchers in this study suggests that perceived authenticity of context (in this case, nature) may lead to the recognition of an authentic self, and that authentic self is a self that is evolving purposefully towards self-actualization.

The recognition of the importance of context in development has important implications for both those who provide educational or therapeutic services as well those receiving such services. For service providers or practitioners, this research suggests that attention to the context needs of clients and students may aide in maximizing learning and therapeutic outcomes. If a context is not meaningful or is incongruent in some way for a student/client then the practitioner is already fighting an uphill battle of forcing meaning making upon the student/client. On the contrary, when a context is perceived to be authentic and congruent then there is a sense of empowerment and desire on the client/student's behalf to maximize the potential for meaning to be made of the experience.

More specifically, in terms of nature as a context, the findings of this research may have particularly important implications for environmental education or any outdoor adventure/education situation where environmental stewardship is a valued outcome. One developmental outcome for all co-researchers was a heightened awareness of one's personal connection to all of nature, an awareness that resulted in an intrinsically driven sense of environmental stewardship. Co-researchers would not have come to this
conclusion had we not perceived nature to be an authentic, valued and relevant personal context. Thus, where environmental stewardship and awareness is of interest, peoples’ perceptions of, relationships to/with nature must be considered and guided towards perceived authenticity.

Future research in this area could examine perceptions of authenticity, congruence between environment or context, and individual transformation. Additionally, it would be interesting to answer the question as to why people develop certain perceptions of congruence in certain contexts and environments. Understanding this would aide therapists and even educators in providing learning or healing contexts that are personally congruent and valued for students or patients/clients.

*Nature as authentic, a progression through paradigms.* As discussed earlier within existing literature, co-researchers’ experiences with, and sense of relationship to nature progressed through various paradigms or perspectives. The ultimate result of said progression for co-researchers within this study was the perception of nature as authentic as was discussed above. The implications of such a perception were a profound sense of connection to nature and intrinsically motivated belief in environmental stewardship.

This is an important consideration for those involved with environmental education, outdoor recreation/education, adventure education, or those concerned with fostering environmental stewardship. As co-researchers interacted with nature, experienced nature, and had the opportunity to consider their relatedness to/with nature over varying periods of time and activities, their perceptions of nature and the paradigms through which they interpreted their experiences evolved. Co-researchers did not jump from perceiving nature as other-than, less than, wild, empty and/or dangerous to a sense
of oneness (that they carried with them) within one experience. Co-researchers experienced a progressive openness to nature, and to themselves within that context and type of experience. I do not doubt that it is possible to make such a jump, but based on this research it seems that the majority of people must move through a progression of paradigms, such as neo-colonialist, dominance, romanticization, and then perhaps a depth of perceived relatedness and valuing of nature.

Thus, my question for all educators and providers of aforementioned experiences is: “What paradigm are you trying to move people into or towards?”; “From what paradigm are you operating/teaching/perceiving?”; and, “Through what paradigm or perspective are your students or clients currently operating?” I believe these are vital questions in being able to provide meaningful, developmentally relevant, inviting, challenging, and yet non-threatening encounters with nature (or perhaps any context or issue of interest).

To try to get people to make large leaps may actually bring about resistance. Co-researchers within this research shared stories of friends and family rejecting their sense of oneness with nature and newfound environmental stewardship by labelling them as hippies – in the most derogatory and dismissive sense. Doing so was likely a way of lessening and avoiding a paradigm and perspective that was challenging, perhaps threatening and generally different than their own conception of the world. So although – at least in my opinion – moving people to a sense of profound connection to nature and thus intrinsically motivated and morally valued environmental stewardship is an important developmental goal, this may be perceived as threatening and even coercive if a person is in a place of other-than with nature.
Future research could address this progression through nature paradigms, providing better understanding of the how’s, what’s and why’s of people’s movement through degrees of relatedness from other-than and less-than, to profound connection and intrinsically motivated environmental stewardship. Until there is a more complete understanding of this progression I have three suggestions. First, that practitioners keep in mind the end result identified in this research – the perceived authenticity of nature and of self with(in) nature. Second, that there is a constant state of reflection on the questions I mentioned above. Third, that there is also a continual questioning of how a sense of relatedness and connection to nature can be dually demonstrated and experienced within any educational, leisure or recreation experience.

The importance of the pause. As discussed in the previous section, pause is an overlooked and underappreciated dimension of the developmental potential of nature-based leisure experiences. Without a doubt, pause, not flow experiences were the most developmentally potent leisure experiences reported by co-researchers in terms of fostering personal transformation.

Providing for pause experiences may enhance the developmental outcomes of flow, risk and adventure experiences by providing an opportunity for the participant to (re)consider the value, meaning and lessons of those experiences. The challenge of programming for pause experiences is similar to that of programming for flow. It is not possible to say exactly how to program for an experience that will be meaningful and pause-inducing for each individual. That said a culture must first be created that values pause-like experiences as much as flow-type experiences. If there is little appreciation for and valuing of experiences that ask for quiet reflection and some degree of solitude
then there may be resistance to the experience itself. Encouraging people to be open and receptive to themselves, their environment and the experience of themselves within that environment may be an important dimension of “setting people up” for a pause experience. Whether that means a person simply leads by example by often taking a moment to take in their surroundings along a portage, or asks a group to join them for quiet star gazing one night. It could also take the shape of a leader suggesting a more formal solo-time experience. Of course different kinds of opportunities for pause would vary from situation to situation, from multi-day backcountry trips to urban school settings.

Furthermore, pause need not be defined by stillness either, pause could be an active experience while paddling or walking, so long as the person has the ability to attain that dichotomous state of being engaged and relatively disengaged from the activity. Pause can be attained anywhere, it is a matter of the time, space, and cultural value being provided for in that experience. Pause, like leisure, is more about attaining a state of mind as much as it is an experience. Henceforth what practitioners may want to consider the kinds of mind states they are encouraging or fostering and how they can provide situations that are pause-friendly. Based upon the accounts of all co-researchers, silence – at least human silence – was an important component of pause-induction (at least within natural settings). Within other settings, the trick may be to determine what sounds are intrusive and masking of sounds that are overlooked or underappreciated, a good example is May’s (1981) suggestion of considering the silence in between musical notes. Further, silence may also be not so literal, maybe it is to turn one’s attention away from sound and towards other ways of interpreting and experiencing one’s world: there may
be much inspiration and awareness gained through intense experiences of smell, taste, touch and sight.

Researchers in the realm of leisure could certainly benefit from a better understanding of pause experiences and how pause impacts leisure experiences in general. Additionally, further understanding of the contexts and environments conducive to pause experiences would be helpful for practitioners who feel that pause-type experiences would be beneficial to their clients.

*The spiritual and the secular/scientific.* The spiritual and secular/scientific are more often than not considered to be two opposing sides and two divergent paradigms. Interestingly in the case of this research, whether one’s paradigm was spiritual or secular/scientific, the essence of one’s experience and developmental outcomes were the same. I avoided highlighting or labelling the differences in co-researchers’ perspectives and descriptions of their experiences and simply allowed their paradigms to speak for themselves through the language used and other direct accounts such as their artefacts. I chose to do this because highlighting and labelling differences would have detracted from what was more important, the fact that the essence of their experience of the phenomenon was the same. Adele is a scientist who does not identify with spirituality, Maya a nurse and shamanic practitioner, Quinn a forestry worker who holds shamanic beliefs, Naomi an investment banker who has an open perspective on spirituality, and myself, a self proclaimed spiritual explorer who does not associate with any particular view or group. Although as a group we have a variety of life experiences, values and beliefs influencing each of our perspectives on many dimensions of our lives, when it came to personal transformation and nature-based leisure, there was little difference in the way we
described and experienced the phenomenon. To me at least, this is a heartening finding, indicating that when it comes to moving towards self-actualization and a profound sense of interconnectedness with all of nature/life, whether one’s views are spiritual or secular we all have a similar experiences of “oneness” and development. One implication of such a finding may be that nature provides a unique developmental context that holds the potential for people to not only experience a sense of unity and oneness with nature, but also to find common ground with others who may be different in their beliefs but who share this common experience of interconnection and true self. Thus nature-based leisure, when encountered as this kind of developmentally profound encounter, has the potential to provide a unifying experience, a common ground for people of varying beliefs. Nature and our interconnection with “it,” is a human reality and yet one which is not very appreciated in Western (and perhaps other) societies.

Furthermore, there is often a perceived gap between transformation (secular terminology) and transcendence (spiritual terminology), this research, as previously discussed contributes to the argument that there is in fact little difference between spiritual and secular development and growth. Future research especially within nature-based leisure contexts could clarify the developmental outcomes of otherwise isolated discussions of spiritual encounters and transcendence. This research project points to the opportunity to build a bridge between spiritual and secular languages and experiences, especially in terms of nature-based leisure experiences and this concept could be further explored.

_Receptivity to the authenticity of nature in other contexts._ It is already well established within this research that all co-researchers felt a profound sense of connection
null
to and relatedness with nature. Co-researchers carried this perspective and feeling about nature within themselves at all times. Thus, co-researchers’ openness to nature, to the lessons and support of nature was also carried with them. The grounding of values and self as related to nature, was consequently always available and so at any time, within any context, co-researchers always had the ability to re-centre themselves. This ongoing sense of connection and receptivity to nature served as a constant reminder and inspiration to continue on our respective paths of actualizing our transformational experiences. One such example is Naomi looking out of her skyscraper office window towards the Detroit River and in that moment feeling connected, at ease, and re-grounded in her beliefs, values, and the life path she is now exploring.

Environmental educators may be interested in this concept in terms of overcoming the challenge of not just educating children about nature but in instilling in them a more intrinsically driven environmental awareness and stewardship. This research contributes to better understanding how to do this, in terms of recognizing the need for more than a sense of connection to a particular place, but for an ongoing sense of connection and valuing for nature on many levels. Future research could examine these changes in ideals and values as is relevant to environmental awareness.

Creativity and self-creation. All co-researchers spoke of a newly discovered and an embracing sense of creativity. Creativity took the form of photography, painting, felting, carving, writing, self-imagining, self-considering, guitar playing, African drum playing, crafting, and carpentry among other explorations and expressions.

The kind of personal transformation that we experienced, an upward spiralling towards an actualized authentic self, within the (perceived) open, accepting and authentic
context of nature, had this universal outcome of creativity. We all felt a combined sense of curiosity and confidence to explore the ways in which we can express ourselves as well as an enhanced desire to express our authentic self. The purpose of this research was not to examine creativity and I only had limited data about this outcome, however co-researchers were clear in their accounts of feeling empowered by nature to embrace their “colour” and uniqueness at a personal or internal level and to express said traits on a social or external level. Creativity was an integral part of the upward spiral of self-actualization that I have mentioned many times in this Chapter. A curiosity to even explore one’s self takes a certain amount of creativity in terms of imagining one’s self in a new situation, doing things that are outside of one’s comfort level or realm of experience. Post transformation however, co-researchers all took this creativity another step further by not only imagining and engaging in somewhat structured but still personally novel activities but by finding ways of purposefully expressing themselves through means of inspired creation. Personal transformation was thus not just a realization of an authentic self but the creative pursuit to express that self.

Creativity and personal expression are a part of healthy development and as described by co-researchers, were indicators of self-confidence and movement towards self-actualization and their true purpose. The idea that time in nature may serve to inspire creativity and both the discovery and enactment of personal expression may be of interest to therapists and educators alike. Future research may further examine how nature serves to inspire this and how that context may be used to the benefit of educators and therapists.
Action, not just perception of personal transformation. The former discussion of creativity leads nicely into considering a unique dimension of the ways in which all co-researchers described and defined personal transformation as action oriented development. Simple expansion of self-awareness or even the identification with an authentic self was said not to be an end point, but rather the beginning of a series of actions which bring awareness into actualization. As previously discussed, these kinds of ideas of self-propelled development are increasingly popular with positive psychologists and certainly have an undertone of existentialism and self-determination but are not views held by post traumatic growth theorists. This research gives backing to the argument that development is at least partially self-directed and furthermore that transformation is not a passive but rather a purposeful and action oriented experience. Earlier in this chapter I discussed Kleiber's (1999) notion that leisure may be generative of development, and given that leisure is an intrinsically motivated engagement, the development experienced by all co-researchers was thus intrinsically motivated. As such, the potential for leisure to encourage and foster self-directed development may be of interest to therapists of varying kinds, recreation and leisure professionals and even educators who are interested in providing positive, (at least partially) self-directed developmental experiences.

The implications of understanding transformation and development as having a self-directed, action component should turn both researcher and practitioner focus towards ways in which we can empower and support people to pursue their own movement towards self-actualization. Therapeutic recreation professionals, counsellors and even educators may be interested in considering the ability of individuals to seek out
ways to explore, discover and express themselves as a means towards altruistic
development. For if individuals do indeed desire and are capable of seeking their own
development, these professionals may want to (re)consider their programming paradigms
or pedagogy in light of how they can offer opportunities for individuals to self-actualize
an intrinsically driven upward spiral.

Furthermore, although this research did not seek to measure or classify co-
researcher development, the over-arching theme across co-researchers was that our
transformation brought us to a mind space of actively seeking to engage with our world
in a benevolent, positively-contributing and purposeful kind of way. This kind of outlook
has similarities to self-actualized persons as described by Maslow (1968). Future
research into personal transformation may want to measure or classify the developmental
“level” achieved by individuals. Additionally, future research may consider comparisons
of personal transformation across varying contexts and the resulting developmental
“levels”. I would be particularly interested to better understand how people can be
supported to move toward self-actualization most effectively. The concept of self-
actualization as an end goal may be one which practitioners may want to consider,
especially if we can better understand the means by which this can be fostered and
encouraged. Although self-actualization may be a lofty goal, it seems to me that with
better understanding, this may be a realistic and deeply meaningful outcome for
practitioners and their students/patients/clients.

*The relevance of “nature-based leisure”.* At the outset of this project my intent
was to use the terminology of nature-based leisure in order to be more inclusive of a
wider variety of ways of interacting with nature than are typically attended to within
outdoor recreation literature. Furthermore, by using the terminology of leisure instead of recreation, I intended to highlight a different kind of mindset and philosophy of experience. Based on the accounts of individual co-researchers and collective findings of this research, it appears that there is in fact a value in, and place for the terminology of nature-based leisure and the expansion of attention to a wider range of activities with(in) nature.

All co-researchers have had experiences that were typical adventure-based journeys through/in nature, as well as less vigorous experiences with nature which were equally (if not more) developmentally potent than their more popular counterparts. I have already addressed the need to reconsider the importance of pause experiences, but there is more to the importance of nature-based leisure than pause. The state of mind of leisure (intrinsically motivated, relative context of perceived freedom, personally meaningful) makes for a developmentally potent combination with the space and context of nature. This is distinguished from outdoor recreation where the activity, not the state of mind is of central interest to the participant, and where from the name itself it is clear that the context of nature is euphemised, diluted and made vague. One interesting question for future research is why “outdoor” has been chosen over “nature” and what purpose that has served in framing expectations and recreating old paradigms.

The fact that all co-researchers shared profound experiences with nature that were outside of the realm of traditionally accounted for outdoor recreation experiences is important to note. Quinn’s transformative experience took place while he was spending part of a day alone on his favourite island, drumming and sitting by a fire. One especially memorable moment of “ah-ha” for Adele was when she was sitting quietly, simply
appreciating the view of a lake and a squirrel came up behind her, acting as though Adele’s presence was no more remarkable than the pines behind her; it was then that she realized her deep interconnection with all of nature. Maya came to a profound sense of oneness while casually riding her horse down local trails near her home and truly feeling herself energetically merge with her horse. Naomi told me of sitting at her home having a quiet meditative type of moment with her favourite oak tree and coming to realize how that tree has witnessed astonishing change in human history, and thus how all of nature has served as a witness to our evolution. These are but some of the examples co-researchers shared of non-traditional leisure experiences with nature that have served as turning points, or moments of great realization and awareness in their lives.

It goes without saying that the use of language or jargon can have an immense impact on the ways in which people think about or perceive concepts, activities, and experiences. I think there may be much to be gained by re-considering the language that is used in regards to both facilitated and non-facilitated encounters and experiences with nature. Why are we using the language of outdoor recreation? What purpose and who does this use of language serve and what and who does it not? Additionally, there are clearly benefits to non-traditional, less adventure-focused and extensive time dependant experiences with nature, and so the outdoor industry as a whole may benefit from a better understanding of these other kinds of experiences with(in) nature. One last consideration of expanding and appreciating a wider variety of experiences with nature is that this opens up a new realm of larger contexts, and setting (such as urban settings) which may hold opportunities for nature-based leisure experiences. By considering the potential for nature-based experiences within non-pristine/non-wilderness/non-backcountry settings a
new set of “clientele”/patients/students is included in opportunities to experience nature. Furthermore, by moving away from a fairly narrow focus on wilderness and “pristine” natural environments, there may be unrealized potential to support and encourage people to (re)connect to a version of nature that is equally relevant and is within their own communities.

Use of Artefacts

The use of artefacts proved to be a useful tool for me as the interviewer and an empowering interview device for the co-researchers. I would recommend the use of artefacts for anyone doing any sort of interview-based research, or studying a phenomenon which has a tacit dimension that tends to elude description.

As the interviewer, I was sometimes frustrated by miscommunications and misunderstandings of interview questions, especially when I was trying to understand in great depth how someone experienced or understood something. The artefact provided something for me to speak to directly in forming probing questions and by asking about the artefact my questions were less threatening or invasive to the co-researcher, giving them something to speak to directly. Co-researchers were able to speak with more emotion, detail, and depth and their accounts were often more story-like and enthusiastic. The artefact helped co-researchers to recall situations and other memories related to the artefact and the phenomenon, which was very helpful in providing greater insight into their understanding of and experiences with the phenomenon. The artefact was a personal and safe topic for co-researchers because it was something that they created and chose to share and so in some ways it was almost like co-researchers brought a friend to the interview, someone/something they could turn to for reassurance, and support in
trying to describe their perspective. The artefact helped co-researchers to achieve a greater level of depth and complexity in their descriptions of the phenomenon, as it forced them to think in symbolic as well as literal terms when describing the artefact. The artefact also equalled the playing field between interviewer and interviewee, as now the interviewee was the certain expert on this topic and the interviewer was in an obvious position of learning and receiving information. Without hesitation, I would use artefact elicitation again when investigating a lived experience and would recommend it's use for other qualitative researchers.

*Interviews: A Meaning Making Experience*

All co-researchers told me that they better understood their experiences after going through the interview. The interview process turned out to be much more than an information gathering experience for me as the interviewer, but also an illuminating discussion for each of us, as to the meanings associated with our experiences. Although everyone knew that they had been transformed by their nature-based leisure experiences, the details of their changes, the meanings associated with their experiences, the reasons why their experiences had such a profound impact on them and other such details were clarified for both interviewer and interviewee.

At the core of this phenomenon of gaining new insight into our own experiences was the simple fact that none of us had ever had the opportunity to engage in this kind of intensive discourse with someone who was keenly interested in our own personal truth about our experiences. All co-researchers said that we had had very few opportunities to even describe our experiences with friends or family at any great depth. Thus the interview process of sharing and explaining our experiences was generally the first time
that our experiences were vocalized and discussed in great detail. For me, knowing that the interview process had provided co-researchers with a safe and meaningful opportunity to share their life changing experiences was the most moving part of this entire research project. To bear witness to another person’s story gave me great satisfaction, but it also brought me into awareness of the lack of opportunities for individuals to discuss, debrief and thus make (deeper) meaning of their experiences. Co-researchers indicated that by simply sharing with me, they were brought back to their awareness of their personal values and beliefs. Not only did the interview process provide a forum for them to express themselves and their beliefs and experiences but also to connect to someone (me) who not only valued their experiences and accounts but also shared in a similar life experience.

Thus, the interview process serves not only the researcher and the progression of academic understanding of lived experiences but also serves to clarify and illuminate for the interviewees their own beliefs, understandings and meanings related to their experiences. From this perspective it can be argued that interviews do not only benefit the primary researcher but also co-researchers. Furthermore, this kind of account of the benefit of discussion and sharing in the process of making meaning of one’s experience lends to the benefits and necessity for debriefing experiences with participants of nature-based leisure experiences.

*Challenges, Limitations and De-limitations*

The challenges, limitations and values of the heuristic research process are discussed in this reflexive three-part account. First, I will share the challenges of doing heuristic research from seeking tacit knowledge to embedding my own story and
representing a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Second, I will discuss the limitations of this research including the highly contextualized findings, cautions about making generalizations, and considerations of the potential uniqueness of co-researchers. Third, I will discuss the de-limitations including taking a second look at who participated in this study and why, and also the apparent void of deep ecology and eco-psychology literature.

The heuristic process was especially demanding for me as the researcher because my own perspectives and experiences were held as an equal data set. What I found most difficult in handling my own data was to not over represent or under represent myself. It was a tricky process to decide what was necessary to share to make my perspectives intelligible without leaving significant gaps or to overindulge in detail which could potentially make my perspective seem more important than the other co-researchers'. The process of writing, stepping away, and re-writing (a few times) helped me to identify what was really pertinent and how to express that without being either overindulgent or vague.

With co-researchers' data on the other hand, the challenge lay at the other end of the spectrum, being aware that I did not necessarily know each detail of their lives and to go ahead and do as complete a job as I could of fairly representing their perspectives and experiences. A challenge of fairly representing their perspectives and experiences lay in the inherent limitations of human communication, as with each co-researcher I knew that I could never have a complete understanding of exactly what they felt or experienced, I could only work with the information that was provided and to share it as literally as possible. Some co-researchers were more articulate and open, willing to share the details
of their beliefs while others were more guarded and less willing or able to be transparent and explicit in explaining their lived context. Then there were the natural differences in perspectives and opinions and the challenge in not just appreciating and respecting differing opinions but of being clear of what exactly those beliefs meant. Considering these challenges, getting to the tacit knowledge of each co-researcher, including myself, required conscious attention not only to the use and interpretation of language but also to expressions of emotion and bodily experiences of the phenomenon. I believe that the interviews were successful in eliciting descriptions of emotional, cognitive as well as bodily ways of knowing the phenomenon and that those experiences and perspectives are well represented in the findings. Even though there were many challenges to working with heuristic methodology, the final results demonstrate the depth of knowledge that can be acquired using this method.

The contextualization of the findings within the specific and unique experiences of the co-researchers means that the essence of the phenomenon is not to be generalized. The composite description of the essence is not meant to be read as a rule or theory. This thesis was written with the intention of providing the reader with enough background information on each co-researcher and enough understanding of the process that led to the findings, to allow for independent decisions to be made as to whether the findings were applicable to a reader’s particular situation. The benefit of putting forward such contextualized knowledge is that it unapologetically highlights the many ways of knowing and being and how individuals’ lived experiences influence their perspectives. By understanding that a person’s interactions with their lived contexts have a tremendous impact on their interpretations of self and their environment, this research contributes to
the appreciation of the complexity of the human search for meaning and understanding in their lives.

It needs to be addressed that there is a chance that the group of co-researchers who participated in this study were potentially a unique group of individuals who have had experiences outside of the norm. In regards to nature’s perceived authenticity, it may be fair to say that the kinds of experiences and perspectives shared by co-researchers are quite unique. However, the phenomenon of perceiving a given context and environment to be authentic and to (re)discover one’s authentic self within that space, I would suggest is not unique. The particular relationship and sense of connection to nature shared by co-researchers may be special, and perhaps different from many others, but the overarching theme of encountering a context and it transforming a person, is likely very common. It would be helpful in future research, to gather data from a larger sample of people, it may also be helpful to study other positive contexts of transformation and compare the essence of the various intersections of different contexts.

Although the transformative outcomes and the essence of the experiences of co-researchers may have been the same, the co-researchers themselves were actually a very diverse group. Educational levels, careers, socioeconomic status, spiritual beliefs, sex, family life, and nature-based leisure experiences are just some of the differentiating factors amongst co-researchers. These co-researchers were chosen to participate not only because of their availability and willingness to contribute to this research, but because they offered a range of experiences, perspectives and backgrounds. Looking back at this research, I am pleased with the choices that I made and the interesting people who participated. If this research was to be undertaken again, and there was sufficient time
and money, I would certainly encourage a larger group of people to be interviewed as that would only enhance the complexity and depth of understanding of the essence of the phenomenon.

Before wrapping up this research, I feel it is necessary to mention that I am in fact aware of the existence of literature pertaining to deep ecology and eco-psychology. I chose not to examine those bodies of literature after a broad-reaching search through many literature choices. The conclusion I came to during the formative stages of this research was that what I was interested in had not yet been adequately described in a number of areas, and there was a gap in appropriate language to describe what I had experienced. As I progressed through this research, a language began to emerge, inspired by the stories, feelings and experiences of all co-researchers. I unapologetically stand by my choice not to delve into the language and perspectives of deep ecology and eco-psychology for this research, for I believe the language used in this research is a true reflection of the language that co-researchers themselves chose and identified with. I would however, in future research encourage a review of deep ecology and eco-psychology in comparison to the kinds of accounts offered by co-researchers. The task of this research however was not to compare and seek to match co-researcher accounts to existing literature, but to allow an organic description of the essence of the phenomenon to emerge, and this I have accomplished.

In closing, this study was designed to examine a tacitly known phenomenon using heuristic research methods. The results clearly demonstrate the significant potential of this type of project. Through this research, a clearer understanding of the intersection between nature and personal transformation was generated. Participants were able to
articulate and creatively express their tacit understandings of very personal, life changing experiences, and by honouring those personal accounts in their wholeness, an organic understanding and use of language emerged, illuminating a previously unclear area of lived experience.

As independent factors, personal transformation and nature were clarified as lived experiences and concepts, and this kind of understanding has implications and relevance not only within the genres of outdoor recreation and leisure but potentially within therapeutic and educational setting, applications, and literature as well. This research demonstrates the need to better understand how to provide lived contexts, experiences and opportunities that are personally meaningful and fostering of an authentic self. This research also serves to challenge the dominant North American valuations of nature as predominantly being an economic resource or recreational space by offering the perspective that when humans (re)discover their innate connection to nature an altruistic and authentic human spirit may be (re)discovered. Much like the positive psychology notion of moving people beyond surviving to thriving, this research was not only concerned with those who are thriving due to their encounters with nature, but with the general ability of humans to seek-out and actualize their best-self and full potential.

The eight major contributions that were outlined towards the end of chapter 6 provided ideas for future research and implications for practice which may be of interest to an interdisciplinary audience. The concept of perceived authenticity may have implications in areas such as therapeutic practice and environmental education. The discussion on people progressing through paradigms towards the perceived authenticity of nature puts forward the beginning of a dialogue for environmental education.
practitioners, researchers and theorists also interested in the human-nature relationship.

The importance of pause is another area that calls for equalized attention in leisure research and more consideration within practice. The discussion on the potential for nature as the foundation for building a bridge between spiritual and secular differences in language and experience makes for a stand alone contribution. Co-researchers' accounts of our receptivity to nature within other contexts contributes to discussions on developing an environmental ethic, and also the potential of nature in personal transformation. The discussion on creativity may be of interest to all researchers and practitioners interested in human development and the contexts that are most supportive of it. Finally, the discussion on personal transformation as having an action component, contributes to the growing interest and body of literature concerned with self-directed human development.

The information, insight and contributions gained through this research are many. The heuristic method proved to be a successful and effective means for illuminating a phenomenon which has been otherwise difficult to describe. In bearing particularly close witness to the experiences of only a few individuals, an essence has been described which may have implications and contributions that go well beyond the island, lakes, horse trails, winding rivers, retreat experiences and mountain views from which the essence was inspired.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Hi there,

I am contacting you because you have been a participant in a program delivered through the Edge. I am helping a Brock University graduate student, Emily Johnson, locate participants for her Master's thesis study. She is looking for people who have had an experience with nature that resulted in some kind of transformation – this transformation could be a change in sense of self, or in relationships with others, or in a sense of where you fit in the world. She is hoping that your transformative experience in nature has occurred more than a year ago, but less that ten years ago.

If you have had this kind of experience and are interested in participating in this project with Emily, you will be asked to meet with her twice at a location of your choice, to spend between 1.5 and 2 hours with her each time talking about your nature-based experience and the changes you attribute to that experience.

All information collected will be kept confidential and your name will not be associated with the study in any way. Moreover, the Edge will not have access to your information and will not know whether or not you agree to participate. Thus your future involvement at the Edge is in no way connected to your involvement in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information about the study, please contact Emily directly at transformative.experience@gmail.com. You may also contact her faculty supervisor, Dr. Colleen Hood, at Brock University chood@brocku.ca if you have questions about the study.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (06-338 – JOHNSON), (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thanks in advance for your willingness to help us understand the power of nature in people's lives.
APPENDIX B

Dear _____,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this thesis research project. Attached you will find an informational letter and consent form, and a basic demographic informational sheet. I ask you to please print these two forms and mail them to me at the address listed below. Please be sure to read through the informational letter and consent form before you fill out the basic demographic sheet. The informational letter and consent form will provide you with the details of this study so that you are fully aware of what participation includes as well your rights as a participant.

Upon receipt of this completed package (informational letter and consent form and basic demographic sheet) I will be in touch to coordinate dates and a time and place that is convenient for you to meet for the interviews.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at transformative.learning@gmail.com or my supervisor Dr. Colleen Hood at 905-688-5550 extension 5120. Thank you again, and I look forward to speaking with you in the near future!

Sincerely,
Emily Johnson
Transformative.experience@gmail.com
M.A. Candidate
Recreation and Leisure Studies
Brock University

Mailing Address:
Emily Johnson
c/o Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
Brock University
500 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, Ontario
L2S 3A1
null
APPENDIX C

Demographic Informational Sheet

If you are willing to participate in this study and have completed the consent form, please provide me with the following basic descriptive information about you.

Name__________________________

Address__________________________

Telephone #______________________

Age 18-25 ___ 26-30 ___ 31-35 ___ 35-40 ___ 41-45 ___ 46-50 ___ > 50 ___

Gender M ___ F ___

Educational Level
High School____
Some Post Secondary____
College Diploma____
Baccalaureate Degree____
Some Graduate Work____
Graduate Degree____

1. Please describe briefly your past involvement(s) in outdoor recreation or nature-based leisure.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Please describe briefly your specific nature-based experience that led to this change in sense of self, relations with others or philosophy of life. What year(s) did this take place?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX D

Informational Letter and Informed Consent

Date: July 10, 2007
Title of Study: The Essence of a Tacit Intersection: A Heuristic Inquiry into Nature-Based Leisure and Personal Transformation.

Principal Investigator: Emily Johnson, M.A. Candidate, transformative.experience@gmail.com
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Brock University

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Colleen Hood, Department Chair, chood@brocku.ca
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, Brock University
(905) 688-5550 Ext. 5120

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to discover the essence of the intersection of personal transformation and nature-based leisure. Personal transformation is experienced and defined differently by different people. Some people talk about it as a "turning point" in their lives, or they may talk about it as specifically changing their sense of self, or relationships with others, or even their philosophy of life. Nature-based leisure is any leisure or recreation experience in which the context of nature has great importance. These experiences could range from yoga in the woods to white water canoeing. This study seeks to better understand the ways that humans benefit from interactions with nature, specifically in terms of personal growth and development.

WHAT'S INVOLVED

As a participant, you will be asked to meet with the principal investigator, Emily Johnson, on two occasions for interviews lasting between 1.5 to 2 hours each and at a location of your choice. The two interviews will involve in-depth discussion of your experience(s) of personal transformation due to a nature-based leisure experience. One interview will focus on personal transformation, your experience of, definition of and thoughts on this topic. The other interview will focus on nature, your relationship to nature, reflections on your experiences with nature and how you believe nature is related to your transformative experience. Additionally, you will be asked to bring an artefact such as a photo (or album), painting, poem, journal entry or any object or creative piece which represents for you, your transformative experience in nature. Part of the interview process will focus on your own description and discussion of the importance and symbolic meaning of your artefact. Both interviews will be audio recorded and your artefact will be photographed as a part of your data set. Interviews will be conducted at a time and location that is convenient and comfortable for you during the month of June or July. The final dimension of your involvement will be to talk with Emily by phone about her results and what she is discovering about personal transformation and nature-based leisure. This call should take only 15-20 minutes and will be scheduled at your convenience.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

This research provides you with the opportunity to discuss your meaningful experience in nature, within an environment that is encouraging of your expression of your experience. This is an opportunity to tell your story and through sharing, to gain a greater understanding of your own experience. You will be encouraged to share all thoughts, feelings, and reflections that you have had about this experience. The outcome of this study will thus provide a detailed description of the potential for human development by way of interactions with nature. There are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be kept there for 6 months after the completion of the thesis project. After 6 months the audio tapes will be burned, photographs and transcripts will be shredded. Access to this data will be restricted to Emily Johnson and her supervisor, Dr. Colleen Hood.
VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS
Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available by contacting Emily Johnson at transformative.experience@gmail.com. Information about the results of this study are anticipated to be available by November 2007.

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE
If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor (where applicable) using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University 06-338 – JOHNSON. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

CONSENT FORM
I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information Letter and Informed Consent form. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time. I am aware that the researcher will keep confidential all information that identifies or could potentially identify a participant.

Name: ________________________________
Signature: _____________________________ Date: _____________________________
Address:-
________________________________________
________________________________________
Phone #: ________________________________
Email: _________________________________
Availability for Interviews: June ____________
                                    July ____________
                                    August ____________

Thank you for your participation!

Sincere Regards,

Emily Johnson
M.A. Candidate
Department of Recreation and Leisure
Brock University
06-338 - JOHNSON
Interview Guide Part 1:

Personal Transformation
1. How do you define or describe personal transformation?
   - In general?
   - For yourself?

2. When and how do you recognize that a transformative experience has occurred?

3. What does it feel like to experience personal transformation?
   - What is your most vivid memory or example of this feeling?
   - How did you feel during, after and now looking back?

4. How have you been changed by these types of experiences?
   - Sense of self?
   - Relationships with others?
   - Outlook, or philosophy of life?

Intentions & Outcomes
5. When you have experienced personal transformation, would you say that you were seeking a transformative experience or was it more of an unexpected outcome?
   Seeking:
   - Describe the experience and context.
   - What were you seeking?
   - How do you feel now about the experience?

   Unexpected:
   - Describe the experience and context.
   - What were you seeking?
   - How do you feel now about the experience?
   - At what point did you recognize the transformative potential?

6. In what way have these transformative experiences impacted you during your day to day life?

Context
7. What situations or setting relate most to personal transformation for you?

8. How has your involvement with nature changed as a result of your transformative experience?

Closing Questions:
9. Is there anything else about this experience that you would like to share?
Interview Guide Part 2:

Nature
1. What is the importance of nature to you?
   What is the place of nature in your life?
   How would you define nature?

2. Please describe what it is like for you to experience nature-based leisure.

3. Please describe your experience of transformation during nature-based leisure.

4. Describe the role of nature-based leisure in your own transformative experiences.
   - Have been transformed *in* nature? How would you describe it?
   - Have been transformed *by* nature? How would you describe it?
   - Have been transformed *with* nature? How would you describe it?

Artifact
5. Tell me about what you have brought today.

6. Why did you choose this artefact?

7. How does it represent your experience?

8. Tell me more about this transformative nature-based leisure experience.
   - How do you feel while sharing this experience?
   - Senses, feelings, symbols or other ways of describing the experience.

9. How does this represent a change in you or your day-to-day life?

Closing Questions:
10. Is there anything else about this experience that you would like to share?

**Thank you for taking the time to share your transformative experience with me. I truly appreciate your honesty and openness.**
APPENDIX F

Seven types of heuristic interview questions as outlined by Moustakas (1990):

1. What does this person know about the experience being studied?
2. What qualities or dimensions of the experience stand out for the person? What examples are vivid and alive?
3. What events, situations, and people are connected with the experience?
4. What feelings and thoughts are generated by the experience?
5. What bodily states or shifts in bodily presence occur in the experience?
6. What time and space factors affect the person’s awareness and meaning of the experience?
7. Has the person shared all of the significant ingredients or constituents of the experience?” (Moustakas, 1990, 48)