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Nancy M. Rowe
Sofia University

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Intentional Kayaking: Awakening to Intimacy Within the Natural World

Nancy Mangano Rowe

Sofia University
Palo Alto, CA, USA

This article explores the notion of intimacy within the natural world. The author blends personal quest with scholarship from transpersonal psychology, spirituality, nature writing, and philosophy. It highlights the results of a thematic content analysis of journal entries made during a week of kayaking with the conscious intention of being in better relationship with a specific lake community. A thematic analysis of the journal entries that followed this experience revealed that certain actions, attitudes, and ways of being increased intimacy and contributed to a greater sense of spirituality. She posits that we can all achieve greater spiritual connection and intimacy with the natural world by cultivating what Maslow refers to as the “plateau experience” and by incorporating the wisdom of nature writers whose craft is dependent on cultivating reciprocity, connection, and love within the natural world.

Keywords: *Nature connection, intentionality, intimacy, I-Thou relationship, plateau-experience, intimacy, reciprocity, ordinary experience as extraordinary, sense of place, Earth community.*

At the first Council of the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers in 2004, I met a remarkable woman whose example has inspired me to deepen my spiritual relationship with all of creation. Grandmother Agnes Baker Pilgrim, from the Takelma nation, wept openly about loss of animal species. As Barred Owl announced its presence at the opening fire ceremony of the public council events, she declared enthusiastically “Our ancestors are with us.” She spoke prayerfully to the Moon and stopped to visit with the fire before returning to her room. I was impressed by her actions to preserve our Earth: She and the other grandmothers travel internationally to educate others about caring for earth and preserving indigenous ways. But I was equally intrigued by how openly intimate and reverent she is with nature. Grandmother Agnes is called to rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water to pray for the healings of the waters, and she has rekindled the Sacred Salmon Ceremony of her people.

Through witnessing her example, I found myself longing to be more intimate with nature. I wanted to sit by the water and understand its voice—so I sat by the water and tried to understand. While the experience was nourishing, at the end of it I was no closer to understanding water than I was before. A friend later pointed out that I was focusing on the

wrong thing. She suggested that I focus on being in relationship with the stream rather than trying to understand it. This “aha” moment was a turning point in my spiritual life. As I slowly began to shift my attention from my anthropocentric desire to experience and understand to being open to a relationship that was reciprocal, intimate, and respectful, I began walking into a new awareness that has shifted me forever.

Intimacy Within our Earth Community:

An Introduction to this Exploration

This longing for intimacy, for reciprocity and the experience of aliveness and connection with other beings within a living landscape, is not surprising as the “natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong” (Berry, 1990, p. 81). We long for relationship and to feel part of the living landscape as co-participants in the unfolding interconnectedness of life. Perhaps it is because “there is no such thing as human community without the earth and the soil and the air and the water and all living forms. Humans are woven into this larger community” (Raymond, 2010, p. 59).

Perhaps we are searching for our true home, our place within “the family of things” (Oliver, 1992) or for a wholesome connection to our outer landscape that embraces both individual and planetary life. As

Linda Hogan (1995) expressed in her book, *Dwellings*,

We are looking for a tongue that speaks with reverence of life, searching for an ecology of mind. Without it, we have no home, have no place of our own within creation. ... We want a language that ... returns us to our own sacredness, to a self-love and respect that will carry out to others. (p. 60)

This article blends personal quest with scholarship from transpersonal psychology, spirituality, nature writing, and philosophy. It highlights the results of a thematic content analysis of journal entries made during a week of kayaking with the expressed intention of being in better relationship with a specific lake community. I share how this act shifted my lived experience of being part of the lake community and how this contributed to a more transpersonal and conscious engagement with my immediate environment. Finally, I make the case that we can all achieve this intimacy by cultivating what Maslow (1970) referred to as the *plateau-experience*, and by incorporating the wisdom of mystics and nature writers.

Awakening to Self and Nature

Experiences in nature have contributed to human and planetary well-being (Davis, 1998; Swan, 2010), to psycho-spiritual transformation (Coburn, 2006; Wood, 2009), and awakened transpersonal life processes, including feelings of connections with the greater whole (DeMares & Krycka, 1998; Maslow, 1970; Wood, 2009).

Coburn's (2006) research of 12 mid-life women thru-hikers who walked the entire Appalachian Trail and Wood's (2009) study of nine wilderness questers highlight the transformative power of nature. Both studies describe participants who were at a crossroads in life and who were able to clarify their psycho-spiritual journey through time in the wilderness. In Coburn's study, the thru-hikers reconnected with themselves and others. They reported an increased sense of compassion; feeling of competencies, trust, and authenticity; increased creativity; and a desire to be of service. They also reported an expanded sense of presence and wonder and connection to the greater whole. Similarly, wilderness questers who had an encounter in nature that transformed their lives reported that this significant (peak) experience resulted in increased authenticity, serenity, and clarity of life purpose. Wood (2009) concluded that extended time questing in nature

accelerated the psycho-spiritual transformational process of wilderness questers who intentionally undertook their own version of the archetypal hero's journey that includes stages of yearning, discovery, and integration. I suspect the same principle might be uncovered in the experience of the thru-hikers.

How we experience ourselves within the natural world is a feeling process that accesses our emotional response; the portal is the heart. Sometimes the heart is opened through feelings of wonder and awe, and other times it is through grief or life challenge. In his intuitive inquiry of the impact of spontaneous weeping and emotion in response to nature, Dufrechou (2002) concluded that when in sensory contact, humans experience healing in nature as unconditional love. He expressed a belief that deep connection with the natural world is often translated as a spiritual connection.

Emotional and spiritual response in nature has also served as a portal to committed conservationism (Swan, 2010). Drawing on accounts of heart-opening nature-connection from environmental activists such as Thomas Berry, Robert Redford, Rachael Carson, and Aldo Leopold, whose nature encounters involved intense beauty and wonder during childhood, Swan (2010) observed that as adults they found extraordinary moments in nature that were healing, transpersonal, and inspirational (Swan, 1999, 2010). These nature encounters were considered to be significant and often "peak" experiences in the lives of these activists.

Peak Experiences in Nature

What are peak experiences and how do they contribute to awakening to intimacy within the natural world? Peak experiences have been described as feelings of love, well-being, awe, wonder, unity, awareness, and higher consciousness. They come on suddenly and last only a short time, although their effect can last a life time (Maslow, 2011). These transpersonal moments can be triggered through a variety of experiences, such as sports, sex, meditation, nature encounters, creative exploration, and meditation (Taylor, 2012). They have been characterized by "euphoria, noesis, harmony or union with the universe, a profound sense of beauty and love, and ineffability" (Davis, 1998). Peak experiences often result in increased clarity and compassion as well as refined levels of beauty and truth (Swan 2010). People who have been awakened in these sudden ways sometimes report an increased love of nature, fresh life perspectives, and transformed lives (Coburn, 2006;

Laski, 1962; Swan, 1990). Poets have often portrayed peak experiences as moments of ecstasy and deep mystical experiences (Frager & Fadiman, 2005).

Many scholars believe that peak experiences cannot be created but can be triggered by an experience such as an intense, inspiring occurrence (Frager & Fadiman, 2005; Goswami, 1993) or amplified by places such as sacred sites (Swan, 1990). Taylor (2012), who has preferred to use the term “awakening experiences” (p. 74), suggested that certain conditions are conducive for having peak experiences and proposes a psychological-energetic theory of awakening. These awakening experiences include moments when perceptions and awareness become more intensified and expanded. He described this occurrence as going beyond normal consciousness and differentiated between high, medium, and low levels of intensity in awakening experiences. He referred to Hardy, James, Taylor, and Underhill to formulate his beliefs:

A “low intensity” awakening experience may be a sense of heightened awareness that one’s surroundings have become more real, with qualities of “is-ness” and “aliveness.” A “medium intensity” awakening experience may include a powerful sense that all things are pervaded with—or manifestations of—a benevolent and radiant “spirit-force” so that they are all essentially one; and the individual may feel part of this oneness, realizing that they are not a separate and isolated ego. While in a “high intensity” awakening experience, the whole material world may dissolve away into an ocean of blissful, radiant spirit-force, which the individual feels is the essence of the universe, and of their own being; he or she may feel that they are the universe. (p. 75)

Although Taylor considered these experiences to be peak experiences, I question whether some of these distinctions might actually be more relevant to Maslow’s concept of plateau experiences. I will explore this later in this paper.

Peak experiences in nature are quite common (Laski, 1961; Taylor, 2012; Wuthrow, 1978). In an early study of peak experiences, Wuthrow (1978) discovered that 82% of his San Francisco participants had a peak experience wherein they felt deeply moved by the beauty of nature, and 49% felt this experience had a lasting influence. He defined peak experiences as

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the feeling of being “in close contact with something holy or sacred,” “in harmony with the universe,” and/or “experiencing the beauty of nature in a deeply moving way.” Other related studies on exceptional and significant life experiences suggest that being in nature serves as a catalyst for awakening, psychologically or spiritually, and to a deeper connection with the natural world (Taylor, 2012).

An example of the nature serving as such a catalyst is DeMares and Krycka’s (1998) study of five female participants whose encounters with whales and dolphins triggered peak experiences defined as a “complex human experience transcendent in nature, beyond normal enthusiasm and prompted by close, often eye-to-eye contact with cetaceans” (p. 161). Five key themes—harmony, connectedness, intention, aliveness, and reciprocity of process—emerged from their phenomenological study, and they proposed that these themes might be true in other encounters with cetaceans and possibly universal to all wild-animal-triggered peaks. They concluded that “connecting with another being, and ultimately, being fully connected with oneself, is the underlying desire of the cetacean-triggered peak experience” (p. 169) and that this experience can bring a sense of reciprocity, harmony, aliveness, and connectedness to the human participant.

Seeing the Ordinary in Extraordinary Experiences

*Nothing here below is profane for those who know
how to see. (Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine
Milieu*, p. 66)*

While the impact of peak experiences in nature can be quite profound and transformative to humans, in reality nature is quite ordinary or “natural.” Peak or awakening experiences that are spontaneous and intense are moments of grace; equally so are the more gentle awakenings where we experience the world as fully alive and spiritually radiant. While the former tend to be sudden, we can learn to open to the more gentle awakenings.

I wonder whether transpersonal scholarship has favored the study of extraordinary experiences within nature at the expense of better understanding more ordinary and yet profound experiences that can help to cultivate—and open on a more regular basis—the every day sacredness of the natural world. Are peak experiences in nature a by-product of a human need to feel

connected to the natural world? Do these extraordinary experiences gift us with a portal that fuels our ability to see interconnectedness? Do we respond emotionally to peak experiences because of our illusion that the natural world is outside of ourselves? Encounters with whales, stars, great music, or anything else that inspires us may bring us closer to our own sense of wholeness within the universe. Are these experiences reflections of our longing to return to a deeper awareness of nature's cycles or to cosmic consciousness? Do peak experiences provide a glimpse of the sacredness of life that can be experienced daily if we choose? Do these exceptional experiences help us to re-member who we are within the cycle of the natural world and bring us back to our more authentic, natural, animal selves?

We have lost our intimacy with the natural world. Jung (Sabini, 2002), Maslow (1970), and later Berry (1999) have spoken about how Western society split the sacred off from everyday life and associated the sacred with certain religious organizations, rites and ceremonies, places, and languages. Berry claimed we have taken the sacred out of the world of nature and of human nature. He explained that we look toward vision quests and sacred places, workshops, gardens, and temples to facilitate our transcendent nature when, in fact, it is inside ourselves all of the time (Berry, 1999, May). We connect with what is out there rather than seeing ourselves within a continuous life process that includes all beings. We see these experiences as extraordinary rather than flowing in and out of the extraordinary in our ordinary life.

Maslow (1970) has pointed out that separating the sacred and transcendent from science also affects our ability to research more abstract fields of being, such as "naturalistic religious experience, creativity, symbolism, play, the theory of love, mystical and peak-experiences, not to mention poetry, art, and a lot more" (preface, n.p.). This is a serious matter because it affects our perceptions and our ability to adequately understand or even validate knowledge through direct contact and direct knowing.

Poets, artists, writers, and mystics speak the language of earth, the language of intuition, the language of direct knowing, and these are the portals into our ability to connect deeply to the sacredness of our living landscape. Maslow (1970) reminded that great mystics, monks, and transpersonal psychologists believe that the "sacred lies in the ordinary found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's backyard"

(preface, n.p.). In fact, one key to achieving intimacy with the natural world may be found through the simple act of appreciation for the ordinary within all of life or how the extraordinary is revealed by being present to the ordinary. It is indeed in the ordinary relationship within the natural world where one often finds the sacred. The following story about searching for the exotic snow leopard serves as a prime example.

In Search of the Snow Leopard

In his book, *The Solace of the Fierce Landscape*, Belden Lane (1998) described naturalist Peter Matthiessen's trek across the Himalayas with biologist George Schaller to study the mating and migratory patterns of the Himalayan blue sheep. While the ostensible focus of the two naturalists' exploration was sheep, there was an elusive possibility that they might spot one of the rarest and most exotic of the big cats, the snow leopard, which was to Matthiessen a symbol of ultimate reality and great beauty, one for which he longed. Matthiessen became obsessed with seeing one, and under the guise of studying blue sheep, he set out across the Himalayan Mountains in search of the great snow leopard. In contrast, Schaller took the point of view that "Maybe it's better if there are some things that we don't see," and focused on his study of blue sheep.

Time went by and Matthiessen eventually returned home, having never seen the great white cat. George Schaller, on the other hand, saw the snow leopard two weeks after Matthiessen left—while focusing on the ordinary task of observing sheep. In reflecting on this story, Lane wondered if the great mystery is, in fact, a by-product of paying attention to what is right in front of us. "Perhaps Abraham Maslow was right," he exclaimed. "Those most likely to have ... 'peak experiences' are the ones most able to engage themselves in ordinary things without being bored" (p. 84). The extraordinary can be found in daily living and in our appreciation of what is around us wherever we are. It also can be found within our own beings. I believe that we must begin to see with reverence, to appreciate our world as living, and to open to the plateau experience.

The Plateau Experience

A plateau experience is a profound way of viewing and experiencing the world. The experience is not as emotional and dramatic as a peak experience. It is gentle, voluntary, and permanent (Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1970) and can be entered into in an infinite variety of ways, such as going to a field or an

art museum or whatever inspires. It evokes blissfulness, pure enjoyment, happiness, and contentment. Maslow compared this state to parents gazing at their newborn child. It involves a fundamental change in attitude, a change that affects one's entire point of view, and creates a new appreciation and intensified awareness of the world.

Maslow described his own movement from peak to plateau experiences after his heart attack, when he was more mature and had already had many illuminative and life experiences filled with insights. After the heart attack, he experienced what he called unitive consciousness, which he described as the "simultaneous perceptions of the sacred and the ordinary, or the miraculous and ordinary" (Krippner, 1972, p. 113). Maslow also stated that the experience of plateau can be cultivated: One can learn how to connect to the unitive way voluntarily as a way of witnessing and appreciating it.

The Ordinary Nature of Extraordinary Experiences

Perhaps what Westerners consider extraordinary is actually very ordinary in other parts of the world. Nature writer and naturalist Richard Nelson lived with the Koyukon people of Alaska. He learned that "in their world, trees are aware of whatever happens around them, and like all living things they participate in a constant interchange of power" (Nelson, 1989, p. 13). Nelson learned from his Koyukon elders that "the tree I lean against feels me, hears what I say about it, and engages me in a moral reciprocity based on responsible use. ... The forest is both a provider and a community of spiritually empowered beings" (p. 13).

Unique worldviews were illuminated at the 2009 Graduate SEED Conference that gave voice to both indigenous and Western perspectives on the theme of "place." I had a moment of insight when one indigenous participant, whose name is unknown to me explained: "I was born in the mountains, therefore I am the mountain and so I must take care of the mountain." Jeannette Armstrong (2008), an Okanagan woman brought up in traditional ways, illuminated how language facilitates a personal connection to the land. She explained that "in the Okanagan language the word for body actually contains the word for land and, as such, there is a deep understanding that what we do to Earth, we literally do to ourselves." She continued, "Every time I say that word, I refer to myself, I realize

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that I am from the land and that my body is the land" (p. 67).

Nature Writers and Mystics

In Western culture nature writers and artists have insight into connection within the natural world. Through their contemplative writing, nature writers such as John Muir can reveal the experience of intimacy within the immediate landscape. Their lens into their habitat, their unique way of joining with the land, and their intentional participation in nature illuminate this experience. John Muir (1872/1980) described his own peak experience at Twenty Hill Hollow in Yosemite Park.

What have mountains fifty or a hundred miles away have to do with Twenty Hill Hollow? To lovers of the wild, these mountains are not a hundred miles away. Their spiritual power and the goodness of the sky make them near, as a circle of friends. You bathe in these spirit-beams, turning round and round, as if warming at a camp-fire. Presently you lose consciousness of your own separate existence: you blend with the landscape and become part and parcel of nature. (pp. 87-88)

Tredinnick (2005), himself a nature writer, differentiated between writers who describe the landscape and those who speak from the voice of the Earth. He ventured out into the homelands of whom he referred to as "lyricists of the land"—Barry Lopez, Peter Mathiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, and James Galvin—to study the nature of place, the nature of their writing, and the relationship between place and the nature writer (p. 20). His phenomenological study gives insight into how nature writing can be a portal to intimacy and reciprocity within the natural world and how this way of knowing can put one in direct and immediate contact with nature.

Tredinnick explained that these writers had their "odd moments of numinous encounter of inexplicable revelation, of magic when the land rang and his or her body seemed to ring inseparably from it" (p. 301). These peak experiences come and go. The main work of the nature writer, however, is to cultivate an attitude of deep connection with Earth—the plateau experience, so to speak—so that direct knowing can happen through the land itself and nature writers can be witnesses to what arrives as they join the land. Through their writing, they cultivate the ability to deeply listen

and know the land in an intimate way and sometimes show something that the logical mind cannot grasp.

Nature writers such as these are mystics who love the land so deeply that they become the voice for the land; they believe that the Earth community depends on their writing (Tredinnick, 2005). As can be seen in the contributions of such greats as John Muir, Rachael Carson, and Aldo Leopold, through their intimate connection and conscious alignment with their habitat, they are able to raise consciousness and create great change (Swan, 2010).

Tredinnick (2005), reflecting back on his interviews with nature writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Barry Lopez, and Chris Matthiessen explained: "We go to the woods and wild places, we cultivate reciprocity with them, we practice love and humility with them in those parts of the world men [or women] have not made or manipulated, not only for the sake of those places and integrity but also for our own sake" (p. 98). Tredinnick reminded that not all nature writers are the same, as there is a dance between the person and the land, and the background and intention of the nature writer play a part in their expression. He quoted SuEllenn Campbell, "What a stretch of land is to each of us depends on how we approach it and who we are" (p. 299). Our background, culture, religious beliefs, and all of our experiences shape nature writers (Taylor, 2005).

In *Desert Quartet*, Terry Tempest Williams spoke about her intention to learn to know the desert deeply and intimately, to make love with it (Taylor, 2005). Zimmerman (2008) used nature writing in an autoethnographic study to better understand his lived experience with the land surrounding his home in the Yukon. He explained:

My stories are a tribute to this place, the living landscape, for I have learned so much from it. I am a pupil of the land, longing for and learning about intimacy with it at the same time. From the mountains and the rivers I learned humility, and reverence from the trees. Otter taught me about playfulness, bear about retreat and introspection, eagle about patience and unity, and the sun, the moon and the stars about interconnection and trust. Witnessing wilderness in silence and solitude informs me about the inner/outer landscape, about truthfulness, and where healing is needed. Intimacy

is the practice of the sensual engagement. As it improves, fine tunes, I can more fully connect with the land, its life-world, and my sense of belonging intensifies. (Zimmermann, 2008. p. 68)

Intentional Kayaking: Exploring Intimacy Within a Lake Community

It was with this yearning for greater intimacy with place that I began to enter into my own exploration of what it means to be in relationship with a particular lake community that I frequent in the Penobscot Bay area in Maine. This exploration emerged organically in my dreams, in my psyche, in my increasing longing to be part of the lake community and to better understand my own blend of Earth-based spirituality. The decision to study what it means to be part of the lake community began as I arrived on this beautiful, peaceful lake (whose name I leave unspoken). A deep longing to connect more fully to the natural world had haunted me for a year. As I arrived on the lake, I was aware of the contrast between the peace and beauty of the lake and my own frenetic energy and irritability after an eight-hour drive on the highway. I wanted to know how to be a part of this very specific lake in a way that echoed its rhythm. I could see the beauty that abounded but in that moment could not fully experience it in a visceral way. I knew that I was disconnected not only from the lake but also from embodied self.

At that very moment, I *set the intention* to find out what it means to be intimate and part of that this *particular* lake community. I decided to kayak each morning during my weeklong vacation and to see what emerged organically from my experience. I listened to my intuition about where to kayak and suspended judgment or analysis about my experience. When I returned to the shore, I wrote about my experiences in my journal, a process that many nature writers use. Journaling sometimes followed immediately after the kayaking; at other times journaling happened several hours later.

The journal entries are not examples of nature writing. They simply helped me to reflect upon and better understand my experience. I would occasionally share in workshops and with my eco-spirituality students, in the same way that poetry is shared. I began to notice the profound effect these experiences had on

participants who would return sometimes a year later to tell me how a particular entry had changed their own experience in nature. These simple readings seemed to tap into their own longing to connect more directly and intimately with nature.

Five years after my intentional kayaking experience, I returned to my journal entries and decided to analyze them using a simple thematic content analysis so that I might better understand my own experience. I hoped to capture insights that would be helpful to others.

To do this, I broke the text into meaning units, then clustered these units into themes and distilled them until satisfied that they were grouped appropriately. Each thematic cluster expressed a lens into the process of cultivating intimacy within the lake community with as much objectivity as possible.

I am aware that my experience is personal and springs out of my own connection with nature. It is not intended to be a full fledged formal study; it is the addition of a small measure of systematic analysis to my story, my personal exploration. Campbell's (Tredinnick, 2005) insight that the nature writer brings herself or himself into the text is also true for journal writers. In other words, who I am and how I experience nature and my own spiritual connection to nature is reflected in my journal writing (Taylor, 2004). Another person may have a different experience of intentional kayaking. Clearly, this subjective experience is not generalizable. Still, my hope is that this exploration has something to offer others who wish to have a more intimate relationship with the natural world.

Personal Themes from Journal Entries

In this section, I list the overarching categories of themes that emerged from my content analysis of my journal entries, followed by thematic clusters of experiences that I placed under each category. I then describe each of these thematic clusters and provide an example from the journal writing. Some clusters seem to fall under more than one category; similarly, journal entries can be placed under more than one cluster:

1. **Actions:** slowing and quieting, stopping, deep listening, praising, appreciating, expressing gratitude, wondering rather than explaining, following intuition, conscious decisions
2. **Relatedness/Reciprocity/Belonging to Place:** feelings of reciprocity (communication), inter-

species communication, sense of community, feelings of belonging.

3. **Attitudes of Being:** respectfulness; gratitude; curiosity; states of peacefulness; states of quietude; open awareness; experience of love

4. **Just Being:** presence without action or thinking; state of open awareness

5. **Sense of Spirituality:** feeling blessed; feelings of gratitude; feelings of aliveness; increased sense of connection; increased feeling of spirituality; beauty as prayer; feelings of belonging; awed by beauty; just being; greater consciousness.

6. **Ways of Knowing (Related Theme):** This section is somewhat distinct from the thematic clusters. It reflects the various portals to becoming more intimate with the living landscape: awareness through the senses; openness to perceptions; intuition; dreaming, emotional and visceral response; reflective thinking through journal writing; awareness of synchronicities; awareness of contrasting states; reminiscing.

Description of Themes and Journal Entry Examples

In this section I discretely describe each thematic cluster and provide examples from the journal entries and title the selection. I intentionally keep journal entries in tact in order to highlight the nature of the experience in a holistic fashion. There is often more than one theme within a journal excerpt. For example, increased sense of spirituality was often preceded or followed by an emotion; sometimes an action was followed by a perception and an emotion.

Theme 1: Actions. The first set of journal entries include those that contain actions that are intentional and sometimes, but not always, deliberate and conscious. In my experience, they emerged organically and were never predetermined. They can be replicated and taught. These entries include slowing my pace; quieting my internal chatter and my being; stopping to notice; listening more carefully and deeply; experiencing the lake through all of my senses, expressing gratitude, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes prayerfully; deciding to wonder rather than trying to interpret; opening to my own intuition; and deciding to make decisions based on relationships with other beings.

Greeting the Lake

It takes time to catch up and to know the lake again. It doesn't feel appropriate to arrive at the most interesting spot before a proper greeting. Greeting the lake is a slow process. I feel the need to greet her with respect and curiosity. Like an old friend, we begin to catch up on our lives. What has happened to your tree limb? Who has built upon your shore? I want to slowly explore the lake's edge and enjoy how she has changed and grown. I notice what is no longer there, what is new and what has been lost. What stories does the lake hold?

Not Knowing

I know that I can easily project human qualities onto Loon. And yet, I favor projection to the arrogant way of thinking that humans are the only intelligent beings on this planet... I settle on agreeing not to know (what I am seeing) but just to observe, to pay attention, and to notice throughout the week.

Treating Others with Respect

It has also been my experience that animals are fully capable of immense communication, even with humans...and certainly with each other...if we just stop to watch and listen to them. The more I treat other living beings with respect, the more I am accepted into their world.

Choosing Consciousness

What should I do? This hornet seems to be a bit aggressive. Do I remove the nest? Will this nest interfere with my ability to enjoy a meal? Will it sting my partner or other visitors? I decide to sit with the question for a while. I am not sure what I will do, but I believe that my consciousness around this decision is important. I am not sure that my final decision is as important as being conscious about it.

Theme 2: Relatedness/Reciprocity/Belonging to Place. This thematic cluster included statements that reflected a mutual exchange or a sense of associating to me or to one another.

Journal entries highlighted under this category include feelings of reciprocity, a sense of community, feelings of belonging; they reflect a sense of verbal or nonverbal communication with more than one being, either human to other-than-human or between two non

human beings. It includes interspecies communication and excerpts that speak of a feeling of belonging to the lake community in a very concrete way. Journal excerpts refer to noticing how species informed one other, how the baby eagles called out to the mother; how loons warned of the eagle approaching, how frogs interacted when I approached closely to their habitat, and how I fit into the lake community. I include past reflections of observing loons teaching their young and questions and observations about how I observed creatures and how they observed me.

Who goes there?

A bird calls out. Who goes there? Is it I or the bird who asks? Perhaps it is both.

Eagle Warning Call

You know when the eagles are approaching because loon announces their arrival way before any human can see Eagle. When I hear loon with its particular sound that is echoed by other loons across the lake, I look up and there is Eagle flying across the air.

Theme 3: Attitudes of Being. This category, although related to actions, reflects a stance, expresses a quality of being.

Journal entries showing attitudes or ways of being reflect states that seem to enhance intimacy with the natural world. These attitudes of being, or be-attitudes, included coming "from a place of" respect (rather than expressing respect), gratitude, curiosity. Entries reflect states of mind like peacefulness, aliveness, and quietude. None of these qualities were scripted or expected. They merely emerged in response to my exploration. These states cannot be directly taught; rather they can be invited and cultivated.

I seemed to open to these qualities more and more the longer that I participated in intentional kayaking. This was unexpected. As the week progressed, it was more difficult to differentiate between an action of expression of love and coming from a state of being. I believe that when I felt this unconditional love, it was key to deep connection with the natural world.

Morning Prayer

4:11 a.m. I awake and greet the sun as it begins to illuminate the lake. I remembered that I am attempting to cultivate a more conscious prayer practice. I grab my camera and take photos at this

enchanted hour. This too is a prayer, a prayer of praise and appreciation for the beauty that spirit has created. Thank you Great Spirit for the beauty of this day. Thank you for the beauty of all of your exquisite and precious beings and for the perfection that you have created. I am deeply grateful for the sunrise this morning, for the opportunity of spending time on the lake. This exquisite beauty reminds me of the beauty inside of me...the perfection in all of my imperfections...the beauty of Creator's paintbrush, the creativity of the world and my life's path. I find myself fully alive this morning and remembering who I am.

Theme 4: Just Being. This theme includes being open to the experience without action or thinking.

A small number of journal entries spoke about just being or choosing not to understand (also an action) but rather opening to possibility, wonder, and awe. This category reflects a willingness to just be present to what arises in the moment, refraining from judgment, not trying to control or modify the situation other than being a part of it. It included a state of open awareness and responsiveness to just being present to what is. While this theme could have been placed under the theme "Attitudes of Being," entries placed under this cluster reflect deeper levels of stillness than an attitude. Indeed, in one case, I felt that I described a unitive experience.

Ancient Stones

I paddle over to ancient stones. I had noticed their beauty for years, but last year, as I hiked through the woods and large boulders, I really saw them for the first time. I felt their ancientness and I felt that I was in the presence of a great beings and old, old teachers.

As I approach them, I am careful that the bottom of my kayak does not rub against the rocks that protrude at the surface of the lake. The space between boulders is narrow and the stones reach to the top of the waters. I wonder if my kayak will make it. An inner awareness seemed to be guiding me through the stones. "Listen to your intuition and to the boulders and you will be fine." I wander very slowly through these ancient friends feeling deep peace and presence. I had a sense of being

shown the way into the center of this family of rocks. I notice a crescent shape made of boulders. There is a space in the middle of this crescent shape, just big enough for my kayak and me. I enter, pause ... and sit quietly in my kayak. The peace that goes through me as I enter into deep silence is indescribable ... I sense the ancientness of the stones...I feel my own ancientness and a sense of peacefulness and what it is like to be a stone on these waters. I feel very blessed as I look out across the waters. All is beautiful; all is peace. I don't believe that I have ever felt this quality of peace before. It felt very old and ancient. I sit for a while and simply gaze over the lake water. I am grateful for this experience and quietly find my way back to my camp. I feel rested today.

Theme 5: Increased Sense of Spirituality. Journal excerpts under this theme include feelings of belonging, being blessed, gratitude, aliveness, increased sense of connection to the lake community, great consciousness in considering actions, and increased feeling of spirituality. They include beauty as prayer; feelings of being awed by beauty, and just being (also a category in itself). Many of the journal entries under this thematic cluster were also placed under other themes.

Frog Meditation

I hear frogs...singing slowly back and forth, back and forth to one another... about 15 feet away. Every so often, I hear a deep base frog sound that appears to be coming in response to the baritone singing...it is curious...I wonder what goes on... as I kayak toward the sound. Frogs vocalize more quickly and I sense that they are responding to my approach for some reason... I experience it as nervousness and decide to paddle to one side of this sound wondering if perhaps that is where they have laid their eggs in the area that I am about to pass through...as soon as I change my course, the croaking subsides..... I continue to kayak listening to the sounds of the frogs. As I listen, I realize that I am surrounded by their voices. I stop my kayak and just listen to the magnificent symphony that I hear literally in surround sound. It is a glorious sound. Now this is meditation! This is spiritual practice...sitting and taking in the sounds of frogs!

I never saw a frog that morning but my ears were filled by the music of their spirit. I felt blessed by their song!

Eagle Encounter

Suddenly I hear the flapping of wings, and to my delight a brown eagle is flying past me, just to the side and a bit above my kayak as he makes his way down the river ... I feel immense excitement about being this close to eagle and this close to the eagle-warning call. I feel part of the happenings on the lake.

Theme 6: Ways of Knowing. I do not consider this to be an actual theme. Instead, this category reflects the various portals and ways that I found entrance into the experience.

Journal entries include the use of the senses, hearing, feeling, seeing and opening to perception; dreams that reflect understanding; synchronicities; contemplation and reflective thinking about events; recognizing contrast between the inner and outer landscape; and emotional responsiveness. Most of these entries were also placed elsewhere. I will say more about ways of knowing later in this paper.

Reminiscence

I reminisce about my encounters with Eagle and in particular about one early morning, late in September when I was the only human on the lake.

Intuition

I sense that this would be the last time that I would be able to kayak this week. I have learned to read the lake and to listen to the voice of my intuition. The next day it rains and the waters are strong. Sadly, I put my kayak away for the summer.

Dream

Last night I dreamed about mothers who are appreciated by their children and those that are more challenging to their children ... Now this morning, I notice Eagle circling over the water ... fishing so that she can feed the eaglets. Eagles make wonderful mothers ... I have seen Eagle, year after year, give birth to eaglets, nurture them, teach them to fly, and watch their babies from a distance as they let them be independent. I sit in respect, appreciation, and awe of this great being.

Reflection on Ways of Knowing

James Swan (1990), in his book, *Sacred Places*, shared a pearl of wisdom for cultivating an understanding of self and the land. He reminded readers to *experience life and then seek to understand it later*. This was true for me as well during my intentional kayaking experience. When I kayaked, I experienced it fully and with curiosity. I was present to what was happening in the moment. Later in the day, I recollected and wrote about the experiences. These vignettes deepened my awareness. I continue to deepen my understanding years after through reading and working with the entries. In a sense, journal writing and entries into nature writing was a way of deepening the experience.

Opening my perceptions was key to my experience. Perception is one's ability to take in awareness and impressions through all of the senses viscerally and with feeling (Abram, 1996; Swan 1990). Swan (1990) has come to understand that many of his indigenous friends experience place very differently than Western people and believe that "if people don't have the knowledge that comes first from feeling, then they have lost the root of being human" (p. 28). I draw comfort from a teaching that Swan received from Rolling Thunder, a Cherokee medicine man, who said about sacred places, "You must experience the power of sacred places to understand them, and when they want you to know what they have to teach, they will let you know. When and how that happens is beyond your control." I believe that in a more subtle way, this is true for understanding "place" in general.

Swan also validated my belief that paying attention to dreams and synchronicity, following intuition, and opening to other transpersonal ways of knowing can be powerful allies when relating to place. Setting the intention to better understand relationship with my lake community, being open to possibility and curiosity was very helpful. After that, what is left but to experience and enjoy? Just let it be.

Kayaking on the High Plateau: Cultivating the I-Thou relationship

My experience of kayaking began with the intention of being in greater relationship with the lake community and resulted instead in an experience of discovering a greater spiritual connection with the natural world. It was truly a plateau experience as it created a permanent shift in my way of being with the lake. It has brought me into new and permanent awareness

of the extraordinariness within our ordinary, natural world. Setting the intention to be in greater relationship, entraining to the tempo of the lake community, and opening up to possibility moved me from learning about relationship with the lake to embodying relationship. As a result, I experienced what I consider to be profound gifts of spirit, gifts of deep love and appreciation for all that was around me, deep gratitude for the experience, feeling of relatedness and connection to other beings on the lake, and a better sense of who I am as part of the greater community of beings. It brought me into the beauty or blessing way (Rael, 2009), a way of experiencing deep love that comes from being in relation to other beings. I left the experience with great love for the lake community.

There was nothing extraordinary in what I did during my five-day kayaking experience. It was quite simple. I merely set the intention, kayaked, and opened to curiosity and possibility. I stopped, observed, opened to my senses, and waited to see what happened. I allowed my intuition to guide my process. I remained open to awareness and relationship without thinking about it. Cultivating the high plateau experience in nature is akin to cultivating any other meditation, prayer, or contemplative practice. My focused attention was on the immediate habitat.

Martin Buber's notion of the I-Thou relationship provides an understanding of how one enters into immediate environment with the qualities associated with the plateau experience. The Ich-Du (I-Thou) stance expresses a mutual and holistic relationship between two people, or in this case, two natural beings. The premise is that two beings meet one another in an encounter that reflects their authentic existence, without having to change anything. There is no objectification.

Buber (1924/1958) maintained that by being open to relationship but not actively pursuing it, the possibility of the "I-Thou" experience can emerge. Spirit is expressed through the others in such a stance and can last as long as the individual chooses. Individuals who experience this quality of being within the natural world begin to experience the Spirit that shines through other-than-human beings and experience life in a more holistic way. Once a person has experienced this deeper level of relationship he or she has the potential for being forever changed.

Rich (2005) explained that the word *Du* used by Buber (1924/1958) in the original German text was

translated into English as "Thou." *Du*, a second person pronoun, actually has no equivalent in English. The "I-Thou" terminology actually describes the possibility of deeply intimate relationships that often take years to cultivate. This is similar to the plateau experience where maturity and experience are embedded within the essence of the experience (Krippner, 1972). Experiences in nature where intimacy within the natural world is cultivated over time can contribute to the qualities of "being" that allow intimacy and experiences of interconnection to emerge and a deeper relationship to occur.

Buber's essential point was that authentic existence can only occur in relationship. The members of the relationship "cannot exist as separate, circumscribed entities that bump against, experience, or 'contact' each other. In relationship, there is no separate subject that 'has experiences,' only unbounded knowing in the open space of reality unobscured by the illusion of separation. Thus, in essence there is no difference between the relationship between person/person and person/God" (Rich, 2005, p. 33-34). It follows that separation between person and the natural world is also an illusion and that there is no difference between person and other living being. Terry Tempest Williams explained that it is this illusion of separation of the human body from the earth body that leads to exploitation (Taylor, 2005).

As one begins to embrace the possibility that all beings are interconnected and move through the illusion of separation, the relationship with all of creation shifts. One begins to experience the Divinity within each living being. Sometimes this moment of grace happens in a flash. James Swan has told the story of a moment of revelation when he visited Custer State Park and found himself in a meadow that he later found out was considered to be sacred. As he looked across the prairie grasses he began to feel peaceful and the land seemed to be sparkling clear. Suddenly prairie dogs appeared everywhere—peeping, barking, running. They came very near to him as he sat in stillness. He felt a profound closeness with these prairie dogs that he realized had been missing in his life. He wrote, "Suddenly a tear rolled down my cheek and I found myself thinking, 'We are all children of Mother Earth'" (Swan, 1990, p. 21).

Lake Time:

Slowing and Quieting

Slowing, quieting, and stillness were essential for cultivating the intimacy with the lake community

of beings. When I rush, I miss the experience and the relatedness. I am often intrigued by kayakers who do not notice eagles in the trees or motorboats drivers who are focused on getting to the other side. The art of being slow and contemplative is vital for establishing intimacy within relationship.

In her essay, *Ode to Slowness*, Terry Tempest Williams (2001) explored the notion of slowness and said that witnessing life in a slow deliberate way is an act of attention that “matters to the soul of the community” (p. 141). She wrote:

Time and space. In the desert there is space. Space is the twin sister of time. If we have open space then we have open time to breathe, to dream, to dare, to play, to pray to move freely, in a world our minds have forgotten but our bodies remember. Time and space. This partnership is holy. In these redrock canyons, time creates space—an arch, an eye, this blue eye of sky. We remember why we love the desert; it is our tactile response to light, to silence, to stillness.

Hand on stone – patience

Hand on water – music

Hand raised to the wind – Is this the birthplace of inspiration. (p. 147)

It was slowing down that helped Abram to open, to awaken his senses so that he could expand his awareness. In his seminal book, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Abram, 1996), he showed that it is possible to become more intimate and reciprocal with the land by *slowing down*, *quieting* one’s way of being, and *opening to all of the senses*. He said:

I rarely before paid much attention to the natural world. But my exposure to traditional magicians and seers has shifted my senses; I became increasingly susceptible to the solicitations of nonhuman things ... I began to see and to hear in a manner I never had before. When a magician spoke of a power or “presence” lingering in the corner of the house, I learned to notice the ray of sunlight that was then pouring through a chink in the roof, illuminating a column of drifting dust, and to realize that that column of light was indeed a power, influencing the air currents by its warmth and indeed influencing the whole mood of the room; although I had not consciously seen it before, it had already been structuring my experience.

My ears began to attend, in a new way, to the songs of meaningful speech in its own right, responding to and commenting on events in the surrounding earth. I became a student of subtle differences; the way breeze may flutter a single leaf on a whole tree, leaving the others leaves silent and unmoved... I learned to slow my pace in order to feel the difference between one nearby hill and the next, or to taste the presence of a local dukun, the place had a special power and proffered unique gifts. It was a power communicated to my senses by the way the shadows of the trees fell at that hour, and by smells that only then lingered in the tops of the grasses without being wafted away by the wind, and other elements I could only isolate after many days of stopping and lingering (pp. 20-21).

Slowing, stillness, and quietness help one to develop an awareness that allows full presence within the natural world and in the present moment. Flier (1995) related this deep level of awareness to “transparency,” which he associated with profound humility, forgetfulness of the ego, and love that flows through a person. He claimed that these qualities are found in the literature of the great mystics and are certainly associated with nature mystics.

Sense of Place:

Intimacy with A Lake Community

When as humans we allow the story of the land, lake, place to inform us and recognize that we are part of the bigger story, the Earth Story that has gone on for eons, we surrender to place; we then experience our homeland within the emerging story and within the evolving landscape (Tredinnick, 2005).

The nature writers in Tredinnick’s study (2005) said that the key to intimacy with the land or lake is to know it—to know it deeply and to listen to it deeply. It is a multisensory, responsive act that implies that we must blend with place—“be” place and truly hear the sounds that the birds imply. We must be emotionally aroused by our connection with our place (Dufrechou, 2002; Swan, 2010) and feel it in our bones like Mary Oliver (2004) suggests in her poem “Mindful”:

Mindful

Every day

I see or hear

Something
 that more or less
 kills me
 with delight,
 that leaves me
 like a needle
 in the haystack
 of light.
 It was what I was born for –
 to look, to listen,
 to lose myself
 inside this soft world –
 to instruct myself
 over and over
 in joy,
 and acclamation...
 (pp. 58-59)

It is something experienced in the body, viscerally, even erotically. Terry Tempest Williams (1995), in her work *Desert Quartet*, wrote, “Earth. Rock. Desert. I am walking barefoot on sandstone, flesh responding to flesh. It is hot, so hot the rock threatens to burn through the calloused soles of my feet (p. 3).”

It is possible to be aware not only of our response to landscape but also of the music that the land or lake makes. Perhaps it is about having “teannalach,” as described in a story by J. O’Donahue (2003) in his book *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*.

A farmer from Loch Corrib intently listens to a poet speak about intricacies and hidden symbolism of the art in a gallery. After the poet finishes the farmer thanks the man for his insights, expresses appreciation for his teaching and for his ability to see the details of the art. He exclaims that he does not have this gift but does have “teannalach”. The poet had never heard this word used before and inquires about its meaning. The farmer explains, “I live by the lake and you always hear the ripple of the waters and the sound of wind in the water; everyone hears that. However, on certain summer days when the lake is absolutely still and everything is silent, I can hear how the elements and the surface

of the lake make a magic music together (p. 133). The art gallery owner overhears this conversation with curiosity. One day another person from Loch Corrib comes into his gallery. The gallery owner repeats the story and then asks him if he knew what “teannalach” means, whereupon he replies, “It is difficult to say what it means but it is seven layers deeper than awareness” (p. 133).

This is the quality of deep listening that we might consider as we cultivate our intimacy with the natural world. How can we begin to hear the music that is ever present in our Earth community? It cannot be done through thinking or understanding it but only through deep intuitive, embodied listening and presence to what is in our immediate surroundings.

**Reverence: An Expression
 Related to the Ethics of Place**

The level of presence inherent in teannalach implies a deep bond with nature and awakens us to our own symphony within the natural world. As Aldo Leopold (1966) asked in his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, “How can we save what we do not love, and how can we love what we do not know?” His words plead with readers to get to know the land, take care of it, and protect the planet. He asks us to shift from conquerer to citizen and to recognize and respect both individual members of our Earth community and the interrelated community itself. Our human commitment at this time of planetary crisis, proclaimed Thomas Berry (1993), is to open ourselves to the wonder, awe, and sacredness within our ordinary lives and to move toward greater intimacy with the living world around us. Terry Tempest Williams (Austin 2006) agreed and added that

we are at a time of great creativity if we choose to embrace it as such, if we choose to engage the will of our imaginations and imagine another way of being in the world. I believe radical change occurs through the care of our relationships” (p. 167).

The Art of Intentional Kayaking

Years after my week of intentional kayaking, rereading my journal entries and returning to the lake, I remember my original intention to understand what it means to be in relationship with the lake community and to experience more intimacy with my lake community

of beings. My experience of intentional kayaking has been life changing. I can never again go onto this lake without deeply appreciating and responding to my lake community. I learned to surrender to the rhythm of the lake, to slow down and to quiet my mind, to open my senses, to listen to the voices of the beings who come to the lake, to pay attention to relationship, to open my awareness to the music of the lake, to become one of the creatures, not the most important creature on the lake. I paid attention to synchronicity, dreams, and intuition to create personal meaning without thinking too much about it, and committed to curiosity, presence, and the mystery of the moment. I followed my intuition to where I was felt called and discovered why when I got there.

I learned that opening to curiosity is the portal toward wonder and awe. It allows us to meet other-than-human beings face to face, sense to sense, heart to heart. It creates relationship and raises consciousness. I learned that we all have stories, the lake has stories, humans have stories, and these stories can be intuited by deep observation. I learned to respect the natural world for all of its "isness," to accept the way it is, even when it is difficult and to listen for the dance between and among all beings.

The rewards have been far greater than I ever imagined and they continue to gift me. This experience has deepened my love and appreciation and for life in general. I am deeply grateful and feel a part of this particular community.

Last day.

5:30 a.m. I awake to see the sun and the mist rising on the Lake. I long to be part of Lake for one more time.....I bring sage and burn it by her side...an act of gratitude, love, and appreciation for the many gifts that she has given me this week...I just gaze and love all that I see, I mean TRULY LOVE ...

I have learned to appreciate the way that Spirit expresses divinity in all of God's creatures and I feel the love in my heart. I take one more look at the lake community, hold my hand up to the sun and express my deep gratitude to Great Spirit and to the spirit of the lake...to the spirit of the land and the animals and for a wonderful week on the lake. Tears stream down my face as I say good-bye to my relations. (Author, June 2007)

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About the Author

Nancy Mangano Rowe, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Master of Transpersonal Psychology program at Sofia University. She brings experience in expressive arts, spiritual guidance, and teacher education to her teaching, retreat/seminar facilitation, curriculum development, and writing. Nancy's research focuses on transformative learning, earth-centered spirituality, diverse ways of knowing, and creativity. She is an ordained Minister of Walking Prayer.

Nancy's publications include: *Transpersonal Education* (with W. Braud) in the *Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* (H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius [Eds.]. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell); *Walking on Sacred Soil* in *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* (17[2], 39-47); *Inquiry into Creative and Innovative Processes: An Experiential, Whole Person Approach to Teaching Creativity* (with D. Netzer) in *Journal of Transformative Education* (8[2], 124-145); *The Healing Power of Creative Expression* in *Speaking About the Unspeakable* (D. McCarthy [Ed.]. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Press); and *Listening Through the Body* in *The Wisdom of Listening* (M. Brady [Ed.]. Boston, Wisdom).

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