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# Entheogenic and Nature-Oriented Transpersonal Experiences, and Inspirations and Challenges of Ecological and Sociopolitical Activism: Applying Participatory Action Research, Heuristic Inquiry, and Thematic Analysis to Empower Activists

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In original research on empowering adult North Americans who aspire to address the ecological crisis ( $N = 21$ ), heuristic inquiry, participatory action research, and thematic analysis were applied to examining the challenges and inspirations to coresearchers' broadly defined activism. The following themes emerged: Entheogenic and nature-oriented transpersonal and awe-evoking experiences; identifying origins of the ecological crisis; high and low political efficacy—inspired activism; relations with nature increased wellbeing; psychospiritual development and activism were mutually stimulating; challenges to activism and nurturing self-growth to overcome challenges; individuation needs inspired and were a challenge to activism; ecologically conscious collaboration and lifestyle transformation fostered psychospiritual growth. Many coresearchers expressed negative attitudes toward sociopolitical activism, suggesting a need for psychospiritual supports to evoke collaborative sociopolitical transformation.

**Keywords:** *Ecological activism, entheogens, psychedelics, nature, transpersonal, integrative spirituality, ecological crisis, sociopolitical activism, ecofeminism*

Many environmentalists believe that without revolutionary sociopolitical transformation to address climate change, within decades human civilizations will be in chaos, at least several billion humans will die, and most complex Earth life will become extinct (Brown, 2005; Hansen, 2009; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; McKibben, 2010). Ecological problems have been attributed to sociopolitical institutions of industrialized nations that foster increasingly unequal wealth distribution, corporate power, over-consumption, and the use of faulty technologies (Fisher, 2002; Roszak, 1992; *The Nation & On the Earth Productions*, 2011). Research has suggested that average citizens and even large citizen interest groups have minimal influence on U.S. governmental policy compared to corporate interests (Gilens & Page, 2014). Some activists assert that collective sociopolitical engagement is

intentionally obstructed by monied interests behind conservative and neoliberal political agendas (Lukacs, 2017).

Entheogens, psychedelic substances, or plants that can evoke profound feelings of inspiration, as well as other transpersonal experiences, have the potential to catalyze sociopolitical engagement (Schroll et al., 2009; Metzner, 2017). The potential of entheogens for stimulating activism is dramatically illustrated by history: the psychedelic mysticism of the 1960s counterculture played a significant role in the environmental, peace, civil-rights, and feminist movements (Metzner, 2017; Goffman & Joy, 2004; Reich, 1971; Schroll et al., 2009).

Entheogenic and other transpersonal experiences are commonly reported to enhance awareness of and a sense of interconnectedness with nature (Fox, 1995; Finley, 1994; Jagel, 2007; Metzner,

2017; Ruffing, 2001; Schroll et al., 2009; Wuthnow, 1978). Scholars of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology, deep ecology, and ecofeminist movements have conceptualized how awareness of interconnectedness with nature intertwines with ecological responsiveness and psychospiritual health (Fisher, 2002; Fox, 1995; Macy, 1995, 1995; Metzner, 1999; Naess, 1990; Plumwood, 2002; Roszak, 1992; Ruether, 2007; Swan, 2010). Research across disciplines including transpersonal and environmental psychology, ecopsychology, and environmental education has supported these premises (Chawla, 2006; Hines et al., 1986–1987; Jagel, 2007; Nisbet et al., 2008; St. John & MacDonald, 2007). While a sense of connectedness with the world may increase pro-environmental behavior (e.g., Hoot & Friedman, 2011), high levels of ecological concern do not necessarily translate into equivalently high levels of activism (Dunlap et al., 2000; Finger, 1994; Kaplan, 2000; Schultz, 2000).

The disparity between ecological concern and its enactment through socio-politically oriented ecological activism might be attributable to conceptualizations of spirituality/transpersonal experiences as private and separate from the collective realm of socio-politics (Ruffing, 2001; Williamson, 2000). Further, contemplating a need for sociopolitical engagement and change can be unsettling, which may trigger defenses that lead one to reject the validity of such a realization and to seek escape in less challenging beliefs and the increasing multitudes of consumer and cultural distractions (Fisher, 2002; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Schur, 1976). Yet meeting these challenges may provide opportunities for psychospiritual growth. Ancient and contemporary models of integrative spirituality are premised on the application of spiritual and ethical beliefs, principles, and practices to all domains of life, both inner and outer, leading toward psychospiritual growth and wholeness (Rothberg, 2008, p. 35).

Ferrer (2011) suggested guidelines by which spiritual approaches and their outcomes might be assessed based on their integration in ecological, social, and political life. Naess (1973) posited that fully awakening to one's intrinsic interrelatedness with nature requires social and political engagement. Kheel (2008), too, emphasized ethical ecological

responsiveness as intrinsic to caring about other beings. Metzner (1999) stated a need for examining and thinking through ethics, value systems, and actions to increase ecological conscientiousness.

Scholars associated with the movements of ecopsychology, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and transpersonal psychology have commonly emphasized a view of the self that is relational and interdependent with Earth life (Roszak, 1992; Naess, 1973). However, some scholars associated with the deep ecology and ecofeminist movements have critiqued overemphasis on transcendent experiences in transpersonal psychology, that is, experiences associated with movement away from material reality to unite with a metaphysical eternal deity or consciousness state (Wilber, 1995). Ecofeminist criticisms of transcendence in transpersonal psychology may be partly attributable to the early history of transpersonal psychology, in which understandings of beyond-ordinary-ego-consciousness states were largely influenced by metaphysical experiences induced by psychedelics (Fadiman et al., 2003). However, interpretations of transcendence that were more phenomenological (referred to as *naturalistic* in this paper, see "Definition of Terms" section below), that is, understood as experiences, rather than metaphysical constructions, have been presented since the inception of the field (Maslow, 1972). Maslow (1972) described transcendence as:

The very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature and to the cosmos. (p. 3)

Transpersonal deep ecologist Fox (1995) described how transcendent transpersonal experiences could lead to greater identification with the natural world. For Fox, cosmological identification is: "having a lived sense of an overall scheme of things such that one comes to feel a sense of commonality with all other entities" (pp. 257–258). Further, ontological identification is a sense of awe with how "things are [which] impresses itself upon some people in such a profound way

that all that exists seems to stand out as foreground from a background of nonexistence, voidness, or emptiness—a background from which this foreground arises moment by moment” (p. 251). Fox proposed that ontological and cosmological identification are more important to addressing the ecological crisis than personal identification, because cosmological and ontological identification can be free from the problem of partiality. That is, personal identification is based on the general human tendency to identify most with those entities, both concrete and abstract, with which they are more frequently in contact, or experience as a part of their identity.

In contrast to emphasizing transcendence, ecofeminist scholars have held a relational view of the self with an emphasis on capacities for mutually respectful relationships as a basis of human psychospiritual health. Ecofeminist Kheel (2008) asserted that ecologically ethical conduct is fostered by the experience of moral emotions involving a synthesis of cognitive, ethical, and affective aspects, which are relational and personal in nature. Kheel (2008) criticized Fox’s (1995) ontological and cosmological identification for their focus on identifying with abstract constructions, that is, the transcendent self and nature, rather than individual beings, and questioned how abstract transpersonal modes of relating could lead to responsive, caring ecological actions (see also Walker, 2012). In contrast, Buddhist deep ecology movement supporter, ecofeminist, and activist Macy (2007) suggested that processes of relinquishing the ego, which ontological and cosmological identification (Fox, 1995) are potential examples of, do not necessarily lead to distancing or to detaching, but rather can heighten awareness in ways which enhance and particularize relationships.

### **Definition of Terms**

This paper defines and applies several key terms to examine links between ecological activism and *contemporary spirituality*, which became prominent in the US in the 1960s. In this paper, contemporary spirituality is defined as informal psychospiritual growth of the individual unassociated with institutional religion (Newport, 2010; Tacey, 2004; Wuthnow, 1978; Zinnbauer, 1999). More specifically, this paper examines *nature-oriented*

*spirituality*, a variation of contemporary spirituality, defined here as belief systems centered on respect and caring about the cycles of nature, other earth beings, the ecosystem, and the life force (Tacey, 2004; Taylor, 2010). In this paper, the terms *contemporary* and *nature-oriented spiritual experiences*, employed in the original publication of my research (Walker, 2014), are replaced with the overarching term *transpersonal experience*, in response to peer reviewer feedback regarding the imprecision of the term *spirituality* (Schroll et al., 2011). *Transpersonal experiences* are thus defined as profoundly impactful experiential phenomena that shifted coresearchers’ perceptions of reality, existence, or consciousness. As in the original study (Walker, 2014), participants are referred to as *coresearchers* throughout this article, signifying their contributions as joint investigators in important aspects of the research. The term *naturalistic* as applied here refers to transpersonal experiences not incongruent with *materialist philosophy*, that is, the belief that everything is made of matter and energy, with no immaterial entities such as souls or spirits or aspects of existence beyond the material world. The term *metaphysical* refers here to transpersonal experiences associated with existence of a reality beyond the material world. *Peak experiences* are defined as a type of transpersonal experience, associated with a sense of being more alive, blissful, sublimely satisfied, or whole (Maslow, 1994) and peak experiences include both naturalistic and metaphysical variations. For example, in Walker (2014), coresearcher Fir described a naturalistic peak experience of sublime satisfaction or awe, when realizing his dream to ecologically engage in the Costa Rican rainforest:

I was new in this rainforest and everywhere I looked, the sounds and sights were so rich and intense that I was just in the zone, in the void, in the—it just felt like there was an epiphany. It wasn’t content, it wasn’t about a revelation about something that I hadn’t understood before so much as just . . . well, it had been a dream of mine since I was really young to go to the rainforest and I felt like I had finally arrived there and when I was looking around it was just blowing my mind.

In contrast, coresearcher Darla described a metaphysical peak experience, in association with her experience of manifestations of nature spirits and how these experiences shifted her perception of reality and affirmed the spiritual teachings she had received as an apprenticing Plains Cree shaman:

There was really no explanation for the noises or for the dreams or anything. So that was really where I started to understand what the spirits are and how we work with them and how they make themselves known to us in the physical realm.

*Ecological activism* is conceived quite broadly, and applied interchangeably with the phrases *ecological actions* and *ecological engagement*. Ecological activism includes, for example, direct action politics, protesting, and political organizing. More predominantly among Walker's (2014) study participants, it also includes participating in ecologically conscientious community building and lifestyles, ecosystem restoral, teaching ecology, activism through writing, art, documentary film-making, and social media, and providing nature-centered spiritual guidance or teaching in higher education. *Ecocentric* refers to perspectives that all living organisms and their natural environment, regardless of their perceived usefulness or importance to human beings, have intrinsic value.

### **Research Design Overview**

In the following sections on research design and findings, all references to the research conducted refer to my previously published study (Walker, 2014). I chose a qualitative design informed by the methodological framework of *crystallization*, which emphasizes the multifaceted nature of research phenomena by combining multiple analyses into a coherent text, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon (Ellingson, 2009). The purpose of this study was to explore links between transpersonal experiences and ecological activism, more specifically inspirations and challenges to ecological activism and how such challenges might be approached in a way that fosters psychospiritual growth and wellbeing. An additional intention of this study was to explore questions about psychospiritual development at the intersections between transpersonal psychology and ecofeminism. I engaged the coresearchers in in-

depth interviews, and in a second phase informed by *participatory action research* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), aspirant coresearchers engaged in an email dialogue with an exemplar co-researcher, then wrote about an action they took in response to a challenge to their ecological activism. The textual data from the interviews, email dialogues, and aspirants' actions and reflective writings were compiled into one data set and thematically analyzed. *Heuristic research strategies* (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002) informed a third phase, which entailed analysis of my reflective writings on the topics of inquiry.

My interpretive framework was informed by *constructivism*, is based on the assumption that the individual constructs their reality via fluctuations and adjustments of the individual consciousness and its body of knowledge in continuous interaction with experiences in the world and society. As a theoretical approach, constructivism entails understanding the complexities of lived experience from first person experience (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). My conceptualization of constructivism was modified by Spretnak's (1999) idea of *embeddedness*, which "also acknowledges our constitutive embeddedness in subtle bodily, ecological, and cosmological processes" (pp. 72–73).

My interpretive framework was also informed by *critical theory*, which is oriented toward sociopolitical action to redress injustices (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Critical theory researchers explicitly take sides by studying those facing powerlessness and employ action research to empower co-researchers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The coresearchers of this study lacked governmental representation of, and experienced social resistance to, their ecocentric values. Further, there is evidence that the U.S. government unjustifiably vilifies ecological and animal-rights activists (Democracy Now, 2014). While some scholars who support the deep ecology, ecopsychology, or ecofeminist movements have explicitly embraced critical theory, acknowledgement of the influence of critical theory is uncommon in transpersonal psychology research, even though the field has historically functioned as a critique of mainstream psychology. This omission might be attributable to the aforementioned conceptual schism between spirituality and politics.

**Sampling.** I employed *purposive sampling* to select participants, referred to as *coresearchers*, who identified respect for nature as the focal point of their belief systems and who aspired to address the ecological crisis. One half of the coresearchers ( $n = 10$ ) had consistent ecological activism for 10 years or more; the other coresearchers ( $n = 10$ ) had consistent ecological activism for less than 10 years and held aspirations to increase engagement.

During the pre-screening interviews, I discovered that the potential coresearchers I was pre-screening who met the selection criterion of embracing nature-oriented spirituality or nature reverence tended to ecologically engage in many ways alternative to sociopolitical activism. I determined that defining exemplary ecological activism broadly, to include the many approaches to ecological activism that these potential coresearchers were describing, would allow for exploration of the challenges and views that decrease sociopolitical engagement in this population.

During the interview, coresearchers were invited to choose a pseudonym; if they declined to do so I randomly assigned them a pseudonym. There was no attrition in the interview phase of the study. In the participatory action research phase ( $n = 15$ ; 7 exemplars, 8 aspirants), two aspirant coresearchers were not able to complete the final written reflection.

**Description of sample.** Twenty-one individuals who aspired to address the ecological crisis participated in this study. Twenty coresearchers (10 male, 10 female) participated in interviews, 15 coresearchers (7 male, 8 female) participated in an email dialogue with an exemplar coresearcher, and 6 coresearchers (2 male, 4 female) identified and performed a small action and wrote about it. Ten exemplar coresearchers (5 male, 5 female) had consistently ecologically engaged for over 10 years. Eleven aspirant coresearchers (5 male, 6 female) had consistently ecologically engaged for less than 10 years. Nineteen coresearchers resided in the U.S., 2 in Canada. Fifteen were European American, 1 African American, 1 First Nations (Plains Cree), and 4 bi-racial. The average age of coresearchers was 47.14 years and the age range was 28–70 years. Three coresearchers had some college, six had a bachelor's degree, six had a master's degree, and 6 had a doctorate.

## Participatory Action Research to Empower Activists

**Heuristic method.** In heuristic research the primary researcher is required to have a direct experience regarding the phenomena in question, from which the research question will flow. Moustakas (1990) wrote,

The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one's self and the world in which one lives. The heuristic process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance. (p. 15)

In this phase of the study I systematically explored through writing and contemplation aspirations and challenges to enacting ecological concern, which had been stimulated by my entheogenic experiences in the 1990s.

**Participatory action research.** Participatory action research emphasizes social change and is based on the premise that the knowledge of the coresearchers is foundational to the validity of the research (Fine et al., 2003). Participatory action research promotes a co-learning and empowering process. The coresearchers conduct the research analysis by identifying a problem, planning a change, taking an action, and observing the results. Coresearchers become aware of tacit knowledge as they ground it in action (Greenwood & Levin, 2005).

Upon completion of the interview, aspirant coresearchers were emailed instructions to write about a challenge to their ecological activism and to email this to me. When I received an aspirant's description, I forwarded it to one exemplar with guidelines for responding to the aspirant. The exemplars then emailed me their response and I forwarded this email to the respective aspirant with guidelines for identifying an action to address their challenge(s), trying it, reflecting, and describing the results. Aspirants were offered the choice to apply the exemplar's suggestion(s) or to act independently in determining their action.

## Narrative Synthesis of the Thematic, Heuristic, and Participatory Action Research Data

This section details the 11 themes discovered in the collected data. The data from the interviews, my reflective writing from the heuristic inquiry, and

the data from the dialogues between coresearchers in the participatory action phase, are presented here in a narrative synthesis (see Table 1).

**Theme one: Entheogenic and nature-oriented transpersonal experiences inspire activism.**

This theme was expressed by 14 of 20 coresearchers. Entheogenic and nature-oriented transpersonal experiences affirmed spiritual beliefs and values by expanding perceptions of self and reality, evoking a metaphysical sense of interconnectedness, and heightening awareness of ecological destruction or of a role in responding to the ecological crisis. The heuristic data illuminated how an initial entheogen experience inspired nature awareness by evoking “a heightened sense of the wonder of existence”:

The darkness seemed to have dimension and to contain both nothingness and everything-ness. I saw my consciousness as a tiny flickering flame within those depths. For what must have been several hours I tried to recall my name, my age, my gender, what century I lived in. I was amazed to find that I could not, and yet I remained.... Perhaps the most significant aspects of the experience for me were the evocation of a desire to be more compassionate, supportive, and loving to other beings and a heightened sense of the wonder of existence. Since I perceived nature, that is, the natural world, as well as the life force of my own body, as a pure expression of existence, that is, *what is*, my intensified appreciation for existence inspired nature reverence.

There are parallels in coresearcher Ms.' description of her enhanced appreciation of existence after taking Ayahuasca:

It has definitely stuck with me; it keeps teaching me things even though I did it so long ago, and it's the feeling that I'm really lucky to be alive so, you know, I don't really have a lot to complain about— even though there's a lot of bad things happening, it's still amazing that I'm here on Earth and that Earth even exists, so I guess that feeling of awe and reverence helps me and also psychologically I feel really drawn to helping the Earth and helping animals and helping landscapes and helping human beings heal and continue

living so I guess just looking outside of myself has really helped.

Coresearcher Uncle Alien described an entheogenic experience that influenced his sense of self as nature:

I ate like probably 10 grams of mushrooms, which is a pretty large dose of mushrooms and saw the preverbal God, so to speak. I went through worlds and things that I can't even possibly go into right now but if I had one sentence to put it into: I saw God. That was pretty intense. And it wasn't really a physical being in any way, shape or form. It was like this energy but it was God, goddess however you – nature in its purest form showing me, *me*.

Coresearcher Ms. described how a metaphysical experience with the entheogen Ayahuasca heightened her awareness of the ecological crisis:

I saw a lot of destruction of the environment and a lot of visions of like sea: sea life, like dolphins and whales, and it really, like parts of my visions were intense grief and sorrow and anger because I feel like I'm really connected to that part of existence, I guess, so it really connected me to that again and I had to deal with the emotions.

Coresearcher Jamaal described a vision he experienced in association with a meditative spiritual practice in which he accepted a role as a guardian of the Earth:

I had a mandate. I literally had to make a vow. I was on bended knee. It was a ceremony that was really intense, and I made a vow to the Earth and to humanity...Yeah, it was You're now an Earth guardian type of thing. It was real and it's real. It's still in my heart, the keys to that.

**Theme two: Awe-evoking experiences inspired activism.**

This theme was expressed by 17 of 20 coresearchers. Awe, for example a sense of amazement, as well as awe in a horrific sense, fostered ecological activism. Coresearcher KC shared how she had been “entranced” by contemplations of existence from a naturalistic perspective, which also inspired her ecological activism and psychospiritual wellbeing:

The very existence of the phenomenon of energy/matter to me is so magical and mysterious and just incredible that I'm just entranced by it. For me, these discussions around a god in something to me are missing that the very face of it, the very surface of the mundane that we live in is so magical and mysterious and amazing unto itself and why do we even need something more than that? The fact that the sun shines on us and we have this layer of gasses that somehow traps it and warms us up to this perfect temperature where then all these different forms of life have arisen and then have all these crazy interactions to me it's just so amazing that it totally makes my day every day.

Coresearcher Sycamore described a horrific sense of awe that he experienced when learning that the world's scientists had reached consensus that a massive extinction of species was taking place and how it motivated his ecological activism:

I felt possessed. It was as if I had no choice, because I knew I had been given this piece of information by destiny. . . . I couldn't do anything else, but I was also completely and utterly terrified and astonished. It was like a malignant numinosity in a way. . . . It was beyond science fiction. This can't be happening. This is insane. Everyone was all upset about the spotted owl and now we're talking about millions of species. Well what happened in between? Where were we all?

**Theme three: Relations with nature increase ecological awareness and wellbeing.** This theme was expressed by 19 of 20 coresearchers. Respectful and receptive beliefs about and relations or communications with nature inspired ecological awareness and wellbeing. Coresearcher KC described realizations she experienced regarding her own mental habits and consciousness in contrast with those of other beings while observing and reflecting during a wilderness immersion:

I remember how profound it was sitting/leaning up against this tree, and I was looking into the water and there was one of those little water boatmen swimming around, just swimming in little circles.

For hours I'm watching this and I just got more and more and more and more irritated until I was so frustrated that this tree could just stand here peacefully, the little boatmen could swim around, and I was so anxious and so nervous and just so filled with whatever I was filled with. My brain was just spinning away. It was a profound experience to just stop long enough to notice that other things had a different pace, a different rhythm, and a different consciousness that was something worthy of respect and pondering, had a wisdom that I could learn from.

Coresearcher Pendragon expressed his belief that nature is communicative and worthy of listening to:

I think that nature is trying to talk to us all the time, not because we're special, but I think nature talks to itself all the time and we're part of nature and so, for instance, when I think about the patterns of storms or earthquakes or the way animals behave, I often wonder if it's a sort of language that we've forgotten how to listen to.

Coresearcher Darla said, "If you ask nature, she/he/they will tell you exactly what you can do for them." Darla further explained her view on how to "listen" to other beings-of-nature in an ordinary consciousness state through the application of intuition:

Each plant, animal, bird, bug has their own song, their own rhythm and culture. If you want to know what you can learn from nature just listen, using the same right brain muscle that you use in journeying without journeying. That is what Indigenous people use to read the weather, find good berry-picking places and call for certain weather. We work with the inner Spirit of all things without ritual. Just connect to your right brain, open and listen.

Coresearcher Garnet shared a beyond-physical encounter with trees that helped her understand the loss of a forest she and others had sought to protect through ecological activism:

I was hiking through a forest to bring food and supplies to some people that were doing a tree sit. I was alone in the forest and I had one of

those moments where the trees were speaking to me. They told me that they were going, that this was what was happening, it was going now. It was a cycle, that the forest was here and now it's going and it wasn't just the loggers. It felt true to me and we felt true. I experienced that. Like a flower is a sprout and then it's a bud and then it decays and it falls back to the Earth and becomes compost for something else to grow; we're in that downward cycle in that particular forest.

Coresearcher Jamaal relayed that Ayahuasca heightened his awareness of the relational, communicative, and revelatory aspects of nature or beings-of-nature:

Ayahuasca, yeah, it affects your perception of nature and when you start seeing patterns in nature, you start seeing the geometry behind the natural world when you start communicating with plants and shit like that, animals and spirit guides, and all this stuff, yeah, it enhances—it becomes alive for you and not something that you're just trotting on. I think ultimately the person on Ayahuasca is waking people up to that.

Coresearcher KC said, "I don't necessarily think that humans are the highest form of evolution or the smartest organism out there or the only sentient beings."

**Theme 4: Psychospiritual development or fulfillment and activism were mutually reinforcing.**

This theme was expressed by 20 of 20 coresearchers. Psychospiritual development and ecological activism as mutually stimulating, ecological activism as an enactment of spiritual and ethical convictions, integration of transpersonal experience in all aspects of living, and multiple aspects of life as paths toward psychospiritual growth. Coresearcher Sycamore affirmed the importance of "letting go, letting go of my self-interest," which "happens in stages and it's not perfect," to his enduringly committed ecological activism:

You can't sustain the work when it doesn't feed you and there's nothing wrong with it feeding you. It's meant to and when you're in it then you're fed on every dimension. You find yourself experiencing power making a difference. You

find yourself in relationships, you find yourself lovable and attractive because you are, because you're with people who are like minds and you find yourself in this place that is what the market offers and can never give us.

Coresearcher Smokey said, "the ethical way that I utilize nature, is the core of my whole spiritual beliefs in who I am." Coresearcher Jamaal said:

Protests are really powerful. There're the chants. There's the music. It's like a spiritual experience for sure. I would miss Burning Man because I had a protest. I was like I don't get it. I've got shit to do. . . . So stuff like that was really profound. I

**Theme 5: Identifying social origins of the ecological crisis inspired and guided activism.**

This theme was expressed by 18 of 20 coresearchers. Identifying social origins of the ecological crisis inspired and guided ecological activism. Coresearcher Sequoia described his perception of the problem that through social conditioning need fulfillment had been directed toward consumerism:

Aside from being fed physically, not just fed, but in good shape, the human needs to know that they're heard. [They] need to speak and need to listen, need to know they make a difference, need to feel loved and need to feel lovable and making a difference is another way of saying having power. All of that is what we hunger for, all of that is legitimate and healthy and all of it is now being mostly offered by the market with no validating pathway for just doing it. So people don't know that they have power and the ability, the legitimacy, the welcome to engage.

**Theme 6: Emotional, spiritual, mental, ethical, and social challenges to activism.**

This theme was expressed by 19 of 20 coresearchers. Emotional, spiritual, mental, ethical, and social challenges in association with ecological activism. Coresearcher Garnet described feelings associated with efforts to protect old growth forest in Oregon:

Sense of failure that we have tried and tried. The last big one was called the Biscuit Salvage Logging. . . . There were two years of legal battles and petition and road shows and everything we could

do to get the Forest Service in the government to protect it. Then there was civil disobedience and over 60 people were arrested and lots of jail time. Then they came in and logged it, and they logged areas that had been designated as protected by “the state.” It’s discouraging. A friend of mine got cancer who had been really one of the main people working on it and died shortly afterwards. People say that it just floored her; it just ended her vitality.

Coresearcher Rose Lyn said, “I guess we each have to decide what sacrifices we will make to do this work, and this is not easy!” Coresearcher Redwood said:

So yeah, I’m not clear on what really hinders me, but it’s probably not having others around me, enough others or enough of the connection with anybody. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a crowd of people, but feeling community in the passion for enacting ecological concern and having people physically around me. . . . where we can feed off each other’s passion.

Coresearcher Garnet described tension between herself and others regarding metaphysically transcendent beliefs versus sociopolitical awareness and responsiveness:

I often feel that I get more angry at people’s apathy than I do at the evils of corporate greed sometimes. It’s more upsetting to me. Especially when people say the way to change the world is to be at peace within yourself and to work on yourself and eat healthy and to be a good person. That’s the thing you have to do, that [there is] nothing you can do politically, that it’s just being in resistance and it’s just creating more resistance and negativity. So the thing to do is to just go to a lot of workshops and do your yoga. I can’t stand that. I don’t know. . . . I’m not against focusing on creating alternatives. That’s fine, that’s good, contemplating your own navel. It’s the judgment that people that are activists are creating more negativity. That bothers me.

**Theme 7: Nurturing self-growth to overcome challenges to activism.** This theme was expressed by 16 of 20 coresearchers. Nurturing

self-growth to overcome challenges to ecological activism by increasing self-care, compassion for self and others, courage, and confidence. Coresearcher Cypress explained:

Sometimes when you’re presented with a challenge in the world and you’re facing something like that you can reconnect, or it’s almost more of a drive, like a heroine story. It’s like we’re isolated from what nurtures us and from the truths that we feel and we sense and so we become stronger. We have to say “I’m not just going to follow the crowd and go *baaaa* like sheep, but I feel this, I sense this inside of me.” It creates kind of a heroine mentality, kind of a brave vigorous way of being in the world, because not everyone is going to agree or understand or care about or even think what you’re saying is important—learning how to take a stand and be truthful of what one experiences, and also doing that from a compassionate place.

Coresearcher Redwood described how holding compassion for himself and others helped his processing of debilitating negative feelings:

I find a new feeling of compassion and forgiveness towards all who are struggling to come to grips, consciously or not, with the frightening situation our species has manufactured for this planet . . . INCLUDING MYSELF! It occurs to me that the very act of struggling with myself (dragging uncomfortable emotions from the depths of my being, allowing myself to feel impotent, lazy, and hypocritical, searching for satisfying ways to enact my concern): this process itself is not only the way to increase enactment . . . it is a form of enactment itself! If enough people are willing or able to spend as much time plumbing the depths of their resistance to addressing this emergency, a shift in consciousness will happen.

**Theme eight: Developing skills of mind and psyche to overcome emotional challenges to activism.** This theme was expressed by 20 of 20 coresearchers. Developing skills of the mind and psyche to manage challenges to ecological activism. Coresearcher Pendragon described “developing psychic muscle:”

Although I'm not a practicing Buddhist, I respect the Buddhist ideal of facing things as they are. The Buddhist *first noble truth* is [that] living means suffering and Buddhists have often been seen meditating at dumps or in graveyards or other grim places like that. And I think when you do something like that it develops what one of my therapy instructors would call psychic muscle . . . . in the sense of being able to face it and not crumble. So because of my job, my educator job, I have to stay up on all the latest dire news, and sometimes I just sit with it. It can be quite overwhelming, but I've found that, if I just sit with it and I just be with it, then eventually I come to a different place psychologically instead of just being destroyed by it. So I think that's an important part of all this, too, developing psychic muscle and staying open and sensitive and always having the capacity to be outraged and sympathetic about what's happening. It's hard to do, though.

Coresearcher Sycamore expressed how he frames the ecological crisis in a way that inspires:

We're living in this tipping point when the human species has the potential to become what it is capable of. It has the potential to mature suddenly, to blossom, let's say. You have a green stem that grows and grows and grows. It looks like nothing's going to happen and then suddenly there's a bud and then a flower and that could be a metaphor for what's happening at this moment or it could be that that green stem is about to just wither away and die and never flower. The more I've just lived into this and thought about it—I've spent a good part of my waking life the past 20 years thinking about this very thing—the more it seems to me that that's what our lives are all about.

**Theme nine: Beliefs about individuation inspired and sustained but also were a challenge to activism.** This theme was expressed by 18 of 20 coresearchers. Beliefs about the self, inner callings, and individuation inspired and impeded ecological activism. Coresearcher Sycamore emphasized the importance of staying true to one's unique path of

individuation in order to optimally engage to address the ecological crisis:

So it's just the individuation process . . . . being true to one's own developing uniqueness as this sort of fragment of the primal fire that each of us has been trusted with preserving and maybe handing on, especially in the face of the obstacles and resistance.

Coresearcher Sequoia described a concept of calling based on serving the world: "It's asking that question that Ram Dass framed, Where am I needed and how can I help? And it's like a scanner with an antenna, and I think it's our heart." Coresearcher Pendragon expressed how individuation needs and the needs of the world in ecological crisis could conflict and diverge, saying, "valuing my own privacy and individuation" impeded his ecological activism at times. Pendragon also relayed that, while being directed by sources other than individuation needs was challenging, it was also beneficial to his psychospiritual growth:

We tend to think of self-development as development in accord with what we genuinely need . . . that proceeds according to the laws of our own being, and in general it should. Part of what our culture does is turn us against the laws of our being and, at the same time, I think it can be an interesting challenge to do things that aren't necessarily that good for you or that you even want to do and develop that way. You get stronger in some ways that you wouldn't have otherwise.

Coresearcher KC noted that her temperament was more suited to creating ecological solutions than to sociopolitical activism:

As an adult, I've taken more of a shift in moving from working against things, which my husband . . . he is a real firebrand and he works really hard at trying to stop a lot of the problems that are going on. For me, I've found that I'm a little more of a delicate soul in that I don't have that kind of fierce energy. The fierceness I have is more around collaborating together with people to do positive projects, but I think stopping the

problems are as important as creating the new possibilities.

Coresearcher Pendragon described the importance of being open to external directives:

I really only wanted to be a scholar who would write a couple of books and then sort of disappear into the sunset. And it turns out that I'm being asked, on a lot of levels, to do a lot more than I ever really wanted to do, and I don't like notoriety, and I have to be out in the public a lot. As an educator I go to conferences, and I go on radio shows and things like that, and I never wanted to do any of that, but, now that I am, I think I'm used to it. But anyway, I was talking to a colleague about this recently and he said the same thing—that he felt that history, the forces of history were forcing him to be more of a public figure than he really wanted to be, because things were so dire, and I can empathize with that.

**Theme ten: High and low political efficacy associated with belief in need for activism.** This theme was expressed by 17 of 20 coresearchers. Both high and low political efficacy were associated with belief in the power of, and need for, greater citizen engagement to transform culture and society. Coresearcher Sycamore expressed his view that the mainstream sociopolitical system should be dismantled:

I don't think really that they [U.S. citizens] should engage with the sociopolitical system, except to observe it, analyze it and figure out how to make it go away. It's a parasite, it's a vampire. It sucks the energy out of everyone and that's pretty much all that it does. It's not doing what it's supposed to. It's not providing people with security, with basic needs. It's doing the opposite, it's stealing that, and where is it all going? . . . .That is so obviously inappropriate and crazy that not to do something about it is a sign of deep pathology. Like you have to be in one or several deep stages of defense, unconscious regression, infantilization, not to say "Stop that!"

Coresearcher Garnet emphasized the empowerment that citizen actions fostered:

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An example we've given in nonviolence trainings is people who had a dangerous crossing for their kids to go to school and there was no crosswalk there. They petitioned the government and the local government wouldn't change it. So one night in the middle of the night some mothers came out with cans of paint and painted a crosswalk for their kids and did it themselves, that empowerment of doing something yourself like that.

Coresearcher Ms. said:

I feel as though the political process is a dinosaur in today's society and faltering to meet our current and urgent needs. Most governments are corrupt and are economically focused instead of environmentally focused. I get a bad taste in my mouth when trying to fit into the political box and try to live outside of the political realm as much as possible. This may change in the future if I see drastic changes take place but I feel like there are people more well equipped to political activism or working within the political arena to grind out a new path towards greater environmental acknowledgement from within.

**Theme eleven: Ecologically conscious collaboration and lifestyle transformation fostered psychospiritual growth.** This theme was expressed by 15 of 20 coresearchers. Collaborating with ecologically conscious others and engaging in lifestyle and cultural transformation fostered personal empowerment, psychospiritual growth, and wellbeing. Coresearcher Rose Lyn described how joining an ecologically conscious community supported her ecological activism and psychospiritual wellbeing:

A huge gift that helps me stay engaged are all of the wonderful, dedicated people all over the world I'm learning about and the ones in my community I'm meeting. I never even would have met and/or heard about them if I hadn't embarked on this journey and now they are filling my heart and my life.

Coresearcher KC also described the importance of having an ecologically conscious community that supported her ecological goals and engagement:

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The farm that I live on, I do that with 10 other people. Every week we meet and we figure out how to keep this place going and then I do that with other people out in the world. . . . As much as I love my family and I'm close with my family and they support me as a person, they don't understand or get anything around the whole ecological work that I do. So having a chosen family has been, I think, really instrumental.

Coresearcher Sycamore described engaging through lifestyle and cultural transformation as a simple, yet potentially powerfully impactful solution:

Become vegetarian, learn how to grow your own food, learn how to catch water, find your tribe. Kill your television, and then once you've done those few things, which won't take you that long to do . . . if it's a younger person I'd say get a bicycle and so on. Once you've done those things, then begin to organize and connect with other people who have had the same realization that you've had and grow your tribe, begin to expand it, connect with other tribes and become part of the safety net that is spontaneously emerging. Yeah, get back, get back to what's real. Get back to the simple things. . . . lower your consumption immediately, as low as you can, but do it with other people. Do it in communities so that you're not isolated, it's not scary. Make it into fun. Make it into a place where creativity can flower again and make it into a party.

Coresearcher Rose Lyn described her process of examining her lifestyle habits as an accessible way of ecologically engaging, as well as beneficial to her psychospiritual growth and wellbeing:

The dominant culture, even unbeknownst to us in ways, tells us what's important about how we should be spending our time and what we should be putting our energy into. We buy into it to a certain extent, and so examining . . . . What do I really need to live a fulfilling life? And a lot of things that I used to think I needed, now I see them as encumbrances rather than something that fulfills a need or gives me spiritual or emotional sustenance.

Coresearcher Birch described her enthusiasm for exploring a plethora of alternative lifestyle habits and skills as potential ecological solutions:

I'm really interested in trying to practice as many responses as I can to see how they work. Whether it's living off the grid, making my own clothing, trying to limit the food miles that my food travels, growing my own food, gathering wild food, learning how to tend the wild, practicing with neo-traditional environmental knowledge and primitive skills and all that stuff, which I really love to do.

### **Excerpts from Participatory Action Research Phase**

This section provides a sample of excerpts from a dialogue between two coresearchers in the participatory action research phase. What follows is aspirant Coresearcher Ms.' first written reflection. What follows is aspirant Coresearcher Ms.' first written reflection:

The reason that I got into the environmental movement in the first place is because of how the eco crisis was negatively effecting my emotions. . . . I was in a deep depression and I found that doing what I could, and what I was good at was one of the factors that helped me heal. . . . I've always had a love for the natural world and especially the animals that are a part of it, and whenever they are harmed or destroyed in any way I feel it on an intense emotional and physical level. . . . When I realized that I could be creative in my activism it helped me to be able to speak my own language as a coresearcher in the eco activism movement. I feel that everyone has a different role to play and if we all try to be like someone else rather than true to ourselves we aren't going to be doing the work we need to do as individuals. I still wonder if my form of activism is affecting the whole and that is something I'm still working on. One of the most difficult aspects of dealing with the eco crisis is finding a spiritual practice that helps me to deal with it. Most of my transpersonal experience revolves around nature, the earth, the universe and the connection of everything in existence. The problem I have come across with this form

of nature based spirituality is that the deeper I go with my connection the more I'm affected by the eco crisis. . . . I desire being part of a greater whole that is conscious and who wants a healthy earth and health relationships with each other and who strive to create a healthy society in symbiosis with the natural world. . . . There are so many people that I come into contact with that don't care or are completely ignorant to the issues and the whole crisis in general and many of them treat me as if I'm a black sheep or crazy for caring so much. This part of my interaction with others is the most frustrating part of my whole involvement in eco activism. I think I don't have the ability to feel compassion for those people in their ignorance like some of the other activists I have come across are able to do.

Exemplar Coresearcher Cypress gave feedback to Coresearcher Ms:

Re: finding emotional and mental balance in a world of ecological destruction—connect with the deeper immutable nature of the world through meditation. . . . Meditating in nature is a powerful way to connect to not just nature, but the Creator, who is the “Life” beyond all lives. Everything on Earth is held within a nurturing and harmonious resonance that provides the optimum environment for life . . . when we relate and connect to other life forms that have powerful and healing energy systems, like trees, our “Union” can forge a portal to a divine realm. . . . Because of the tremendous physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits of meditation, it should be a cornerstone of our day. Ask to be shown the strength, peace and immutable power in nature that can be a boon in your own life and to connect with the strength, peace and power within yourself. . . .

When you see the sacredness of all life, while many around you “do not see,” be thankful that you have this knowing connection and strengthen your resolve to pay attention to what matters in life, versus being pleasing to others, or even making sense to others. . . . Most of the human beings that we now consider visionary, were often misunderstood in their own time. . . .

Strengthen your connection to all that you know, and see, and it will be your “life line” in the face of ignorance, and uncaring responses. Know that each human being comes into understanding in their own way and time. By staying true to your beliefs—you can effect others' opinions, perhaps not today, or tomorrow, but perhaps years from now. I know that at least one person that you shared your love of nature with that seemed uncaring in the moment—will “awaken” to the sacredness of life. Their interaction with you was one step along the way for them. Know that your efforts to bring the light of the sacredness of all life to the awareness of others are never in vain. Do not expect to be applauded or awarded in that moment. Just have faith that you were created the way you are—for a divine purpose, and that your actions matter. . . . Work towards forgiveness—for your own wellbeing. Imagine the best outcome—even for those you hate and know—that sometimes the worst “sinners” in your eyes today, may have a profound change of heart and be harbingers of great good.

For example, a leading scientist and conservationist in China who works tirelessly to protect marine life, once worked for a whaling company that killed whales. His job was to help find the whales, as he understood their travel routes and behavior. One day, he looked deeply into a captured whale's eye and understood the “sin” that he was committing. He quit that day and has been in service to protect whales and other marine life for over thirty years. It was a difficult change for him to make given his connection to the industry he was in and he had to completely build a new life, and have new people come into his life.

Continue to focus on the behavior and actions that are wrong, not the people doing them. . . . Actions and behaviors can change in an instant, and people are good at heart. . . . Start with yourself. Know that you can change behavior that makes you unhappy and stop torturing yourself.

Aspirant Coresearcher Ms.' actions and final reflection were:

Desired Outcome: Open up to others who are at different levels of awareness in their actions toward the Earth and ecosystem. Action: Engage with others who are not as aware about how their lifestyle is affecting the biosphere. Include someone who is more experienced . . . to help the process go smoothly and learn from their responses. . . . I hope to learn how to compassionately communicate my feelings and educate others on how they can improve their connection with the Earth. Also connect with others who feel or have felt similar feelings and learn how they cope with/transform them. Results: I had the opportunity to host a webinar with my mentor and elder, Wes. The topic of the webinar was "Loving Nature, Hating Humans." We have a large group of people who were also feeling this way. Wes gave us ways to deal with these emotions that come up in us. It was very insightful. . . . Meditation was a big one. Sitting in Nature. Understanding that others are at a different place in their journey. Learning the importance of understanding and compassion. It felt good to facilitate a positive experience for people who are feeling the same way I am. . . . It brought me closer to my community and showed me the power of using compassion instead of hate when relating to others. Education is so important for improving how humans interact with the Natural world. I need to create ways to gently nudge people in the right direction instead of ostracizing them.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

To specifically address scant research on links between entheogenic and other nature-oriented transpersonal experiences and activism, only coresearchers who described ecocentrism and, or nature-oriented spirituality as the primary basis of their value system were selected. Predominant affiliation with an organized religion was identified as a criteria for exclusion from this study. Generally speaking, links between organized religions and ecological activism have received more scholarly attention than those between contemporary and nature-oriented spirituality (for examples of research on relationships between religion and activism, see Brown, 2011;

Gottlieb, 2004; Sherkat & Ellison, 2011; Shibley & Wiggins, 1997; Tarakeshwar et al., 2001). The majority of the coresearchers identified as European American, likely reflecting systemic oppression of ethnic minorities and privilege associated with participation in the study, for example, coresearchers had higher than average levels of education, had their basic needs met, and enough security and free time to contemplate these issues and participate in the study. The reviewed literature originated primarily from European American bodies of literature, likely reflecting the aforementioned privilege and oppression, which is present in scholarly publishing. Since coresearchers engaged in widely varying forms of ecological activism, details specific to variations within those categories might not have been adequately captured.

### **Discussion**

In Walker (2014), transcendent transpersonal experiences enhanced many coresearchers' recognition of the relational, communicative, and revelatory capacities of nature and individual beings-of-nature and inspired and sustained ecological activism. This finding contradicts Kheel's (2008) criticism of transpersonal transcendence as a vehicle for inspiring the enactment of caring for others.

Individual characteristics, gifts, or a sense of calling or purpose led coresearchers to engage in many varied forms of ecological activism. For some coresearchers, such views about their individuality led them to avoid sociopolitical activism. However, many coresearchers said that belief in following inner callings, passions, and individuation needs was an important source of inspiration and sustenance of their sociopolitical and other approaches to ecological activism. From personal experience as well as coresearchers' reports, I appreciate diverse approaches to ecological activism, as well as the significance of meeting self-actualization or individuation needs through engagement.

Defining ecological activism broadly in this study allowed for thematic exploration of many coresearchers' negative attitudes toward sociopolitical activism. Climate change activist Hallam (2019) stated: "We must adopt the most successful model for regime change shown by the

social scientific research: the civil resistance model. This involves mass participation civil disobedience—tens to hundreds of thousands of people blocking the centres of cities to demand change.” (p. 31). If Hallam and other environmental thinkers are correct in their assessment of the large number of people needed to effectively address the ecological crisis, allowing individual preferences alone to dictate how to respond will not meet this critical, exigent need for unprecedentedly high levels of responsiveness to transform the sociopolitical system.

Some transpersonal thinkers have emphasized that in responding to the urgency of the ecological crisis, individuals might fail to focus on the more rarefied metaphysical dimensions of the problem or for a need for a comprehensive change in worldview (Canty, 2014; Kelly, 2004; Wilber, 1995). For example, Schroll (2007) stated he does not discourage sociopolitical activism, but he is critical of it:

The motivations that ignite most environmental activists are simply reactionary and symptom focused. Trying to heal each one of these separate symptoms is a never-ending task because the system keeps breaking down amidst our efforts to heal it; meaning, absent from such a focus is a coherent philosophy of life that enables people to sustain and nurture themselves. (p. 31)

However, all of the coresearchers in this study expressed challenges, despite their deeply held ecocentric values and efforts to integrate these in their lives and communities. I feel it is important to emphasize that changing one’s intrasubjective experience is not enough to address the ecological crisis and the cultivation of a “coherent philosophy of life” (Schroll, 2007, p. 31) is not mutually exclusive to the critical need for collective sociopolitical responsiveness.

As the heuristic and thematic analyses highlighted, a criticism of sociopolitical activism in transpersonal and spiritual communities is that focusing on ecological problems and resistance strategies, rather than creating alternatives is emotionally “negative.” However, research has shown a link between activism and positive affect, hopefulness, self-actualization, and psychological

wellbeing (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Further, as Macy (1995, 2018) has emphasized, emotions of anger naturally energize responsive action. Findings from this study suggested that while emotional distress in response to the ecological crisis was in some situations a challenge to ecological activism, a horrific sense of awe in response to ecological destruction, as well as learning more about systemic causes of ecological issues, also inspired and directed ecological action.

As noted, research has supported that activists experience higher levels of wellbeing and self-actualization (Klar & Kasser, 2009), but the direction of causation has not been made clear—does wellbeing lead to engaging in activism or does engaging in activism foster wellbeing? Findings from this study suggested a mutually stimulating relationship, for example, applying strategies for meeting the challenges of enduring ecological engagement also supported psychospiritual growth.

Schroll and Polansky (2017) posited that restoration of our relations with nature may be attained through rituals that celebrate rites of passage, appreciation of nature’s processes of cyclic change, and enculturation into transpersonal ecological consciousness. Findings from this study suggest a need for, and possible efficacy of, application of such rituals and other entheogenic and nature-oriented transpersonal practices to address barriers and challenges of activism, to address the sociopolitical systems and institutions that underly the ecological crisis. The requirement for focus, presence, and collaborative action of this moment of ecological crisis may offer opportunities for enactment, integration, and deepening of transpersonal realizations.

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### About the Journal

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