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# Nature as Spiritual Lived Experience: How Five Christian Theologians Encounter the Spirit In and Through the Natural World

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NATURE AS SPIRITUAL LIVED EXPERIENCE:  
HOW FIVE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS ENCOUNTER  
THE SPIRIT IN AND THROUGH THE NATURAL WORLD

By

Brad A. Martell

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Environmental Studies

at

Antioch University New England

2016

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To Lori

Returning to the *wild* together!

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored five Western Christian theologians' religious lived experience of God's Spirit in and through Nature. The hermeneutic phenomenological research method was utilized. Rich descriptions of lived experience were collected through 60-90 minute long phenomenological interviews which were recorded and transcribed verbatim into a text for analysis. Analysis included repeated readings of the text, identification of themes, and validation and/or correction of themes. Synthesis looked at the research as a whole and established implications and applications for Christian theology, particularly ecotheology.

The study contributes to the literature of phenomenology and theology, calls for a place for lived experience (along with scripture, tradition, and reason) within theology, seeks to encourage theologians to incorporate into their work personal lived experiences of the divine in and through Nature, and ultimately hopes to illuminate one way to help inspire the church to more deeply embrace the healing of Earth as a moral responsibility. The research should be of particular interest to phenomenological scholars, other scholars looking at human relationship with the environment/natural world, professional theologians engaged in developing ecotheology, and students of Christian theology.

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## Preface

### A Personal Experience

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

—William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*

On an autumn evening many years ago, I stood upon a boulder strewn shore along the Penobscot River backwaters near Orland, Maine. I stared across the river as the sun seared the forested horizon. The water's surface reflected the raging sky fire. Above, stratus clouds glowed like yellow, orange, and red embers. Although the fall air was crisped and chilled, I felt surprising warmth like the feeling of standing before a blazing campfire. But unlike warming only one side of my body the heat enveloped me like I was now standing in the center of the fire ring with the flames all round me.

I stood there listening to the lap of water along the stony shore. My eyes were mesmerized like I was staring into the campfire watching images flicker within the flames.

I remained still and quiet, just resting in the warmth and beauty. The heat continued to infuse deeper into my very being. I became aware of the warmth not only



within me, but flowing outward as well, permeating the water, forest, and sky. The warmth was comforting as it filled in and through me. And then it felt like layers of my sense of self were burning away. I found my sense of self utterly insignificant like a mere pile of burnt ash left behind from the wildfire burning down the horizon. I was nothing in comparison to the magnificence of the glowing sun, water, stone, and trees. I was nothing compared to this warming presence enfolding me and everything around me. This disrupting feeling of my diminutiveness, this nothingness of self flared hot as a shower of sparks then was gone. My unsettling awareness of insignificance grew into a realization that my existence, my creaturely being was meaningful, significant, and loved. I did not exist alone. I existed in relationship inseparable with the existence of the rocks, the burning clouds, and the setting sun. I was inseparable from the glowing water, the darkening forest, and this warming sense of presence permeating in and through me and all life.

I lay in bed that night contemplating my experience and the manifestation of the interconnectedness I had felt. From studying ecology, theology, and philosophy I understood this sense of interrelatedness in a highly conceptualized academic manner. The concept of a wholistic and interconnected Earth, a planetary system, universes with a Creator was what I believed in. But at that particular time and place along the Penobscot River backwaters my experience and beliefs became more than a cognitive process of knowing and being in the world. My sense of being . . . this I . . . me . . . my creatureliness . . . was meaningful, but not because I, this *self*, existed. Rather it was because I existed in relationship with other subjects, other selves, other beings. I was

made of the same stuff all things are made from. And live off the same stuff all things live off of -- air, water, nutrients, and natural processes.

What I understood intellectually before came as an intense sensory, aesthetic, and self-transcendent experience. The warm presence with the rocks, water, and sun moved *in* and *through* me as I moved *in* and *through* them. It was my whole being (mind, body, and spirit) warmly wrapped and inseparably connected with the world and this sense of an enveloping presence.

I remember my words not being poetically gracefully as I tried to describe my experience to Lori, my spouse, later that night. The tremendous feelings and sense of wonder I felt escaped the grasp of language. My experience was too fresh, raw, permeating, and wondrous for words to articulate such an enveloping sense of presence and interconnection with that place along the shore. Though, I knew somehow in spite of my awkward and limited lexicon of language Lori expressed understanding. I saw reflected in her blue-green eyes sparks of deep knowing and reassurance of my experience.

My eyes grew heavier and the sunset in my thoughts burned ever lower passed the horizon of consciousness. Drifting off to sleep, I recalled lines from one of my favorite Wordsworth's poems: "Whose dwelling is . . . setting suns . . . round oceans . . . living air . . . blue sky . . ." What this poet of English Romanticism wrote over two hundred years ago, as he stood on the banks of the Wye River, spoke to my experience as though he had stood right next to me along the banks of the Penobscot. I felt tremendously blessed by

the beauty, wonder, peace, and realization of life's inseparability gifted to me as the sun blazed across the water with the presence whose dwelling "rolls through all things."

### Reflection

Years of reflection upon the above foundational experience held the seeds of inspiration for this study. In my academic and professional career, as I further cultivated intersections between ecological and theological thought, I have returned again and again to my Penobscot experience, pondering that the power of that deeply spiritual encounter of the divine was fully experienced through my bodily senses in that lovely place.

Understanding that personal experience made me aware of how important my senses are to my spiritual formation, and how the particulars of place and time shape my experience. My spiritual experiences do not happen in a vacuum independent of place and time. My interaction and relationships, my perspective, and attitudes . . . how I see the world, how I know God, comes from how I experience through my body in the world.

Experiences such as my Penobscot encounter help continue to "ground" my theology in the here and now. They reinforce the interconnections of all life and that my own life was not separate from the rest of creation. This is humbling and makes me want to be in the world in an ever deepening consciousness. My life is meaningful because I am able to experience the world through my spirit/senses/body.

Eventually, I delved into phenomenological philosophy as a dialogue partner with ecological theology. In this interdisciplinary pursuit I discovered a methodology and framework of inquiry within which to explore my questions. Given my own experiences,

I wanted to know if others with theological leanings also had religious lived experiences in and through the natural world.

Initial questions that shaped this study included: How had others experienced God's presence in the natural world? How might others describe and interpret their embodied lived experiences? How were their experiences meaningful to them and/or to others? And, how might embodied lived experience contribute to an understanding of religious and spiritual experience and meaning? These questions led me to focus my study on exploring five Christian theologians' religious embodied lived experiences of the natural world.

A number of potential contributions present themselves to ecological theology from a study of Christian theologians' religious embodied lived experience. Embodied lived experience can contribute to the expression and interpretation of experiencing the Spirit in and through the natural world. Exploring our embodied lived experience helps to ground theological and spiritual experiences in particular times, spaces, and relationships. What we see, hear, taste, smell, and feel when describing spiritual experiences of Nature are not generic human experiences, but unique experiences of time and place. Further, theological and spiritual formation is not merely a mental process, but a wholistic expression of what we refer to as the inseparability of body, mind, and spirit. Exploring embodied lived experience also helps us work through human constructed dichotomies or dualistic thinking that has led to human disconnection from the rest of the natural world. It helps to develop theological thought that is primarily

focused on the here and now; our everyday embodied encounters and relationships with the world.

Another potential contribution is helping to cultivate greater awareness in interpreting our ecological crisis as a deeply spiritual crisis resulting from our failure to truly understand our lives in a wholistic and inseparable interrelationship with all of Nature. And, exploring embodied lived experience can contribute to ecological theology through placing a greater emphasis on the worth of all people and the sacredness of Creation.

## Conclusion

A poetic summary of my life, ministry, and this specific study I find beautifully expressed by the poet Mary Oliver: “Love for the earth and love for you are having a long conversation in my heart.”<sup>1</sup> Oliver’s long conversation in her heart between spiritual and ecological explorations inspires my own “long conversation” of love for the natural world and the sacred. The genesis, described above, for my ecological and theological conversation began from my embodied lived experiences, education, and the meaning I have discovered for my life and relationships. It is a conversation that is kindled by my passionate concern for ecological healing and wholeness. As well as my deep love for the Earth’s beauty, wonder, mystery, and diversity of all life and life-giving processes. My hope is that exploring the phenomenon of experiencing the Spirit in and through Nature will contribute to how we interpret and find meaning from our embodied

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1. Mary Oliver, *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 69.

lived experiences with the divine and natural world. Additionally, I hope it will help us develop more effective thought and actions for protecting and healing the Earth and ourselves.

## Chapter 1

### Orienting to the Phenomenon

Phenomenology is not concerned primarily with the nomological or factual aspects of some state of affairs; rather, it always asks, what is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced?

—Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*

#### Introduction

This study is an investigation into religious lived experience of God’s Spirit in and through the natural world. It seeks to more fully understand what this lived experience is like for five Christian theologians. In what ways do they describe and construct meaning from their respective experiences? What might their experiences reveal about the essential nature of the phenomenon of lived experience of the Spirit in and through the natural world?

These questions probe deeper than mere reporting of story, attempting to get to the essential meaning of a lived experience. Van Manen describes this distinction as follows:

[I]t is not enough to simply recall experiences I or others may have had with respect to a particular phenomenon. Instead, I must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience as lived through, are brought back, as it were, and in such way that we recognize this description as a possible experience, which means as a possible interpretation of that experience.<sup>2</sup>

Informing this study is the premise that the Christian tradition shares a permeating relationship with the natural world. Nature imagery, metaphor, and symbolism have been conspicuous expressions of what the nature of God might be like. The natural world has

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2. Max van Manen’s *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 41.

shaped how human beings have thought about religious and spiritual experience, theological discourse, and beliefs. Likewise, how theological understanding and religious practice have been constructed throughout the Christian tradition has shaped human awareness, meaning, and relationship (positively and negatively) with the natural world that includes human and other than human species and Earth's biospheric systems.

One prominent theological idea from this transitive relationship between Christianity and the natural world is belief in a Creator God who creates, sustains, and restores the Creation (Earth and the infinite Cosmos). Christian tradition and theology describe God the Creator as being both a transcendent and immanent entity. Transcendently, God is understood as infinitely existing before, outside, and beyond the Creation. God as immanent is understood as God being incarnated or embodied in all of Creation. This latter quality ascribed to God holds a significant implication for Christians in the belief that human beings are able to experience God's Spirit in and through the phenomena of the natural world.<sup>3</sup>

This pre-understanding of God's immanent nature from Christian theology, belief, and tradition was an initial inspiration for this study. Foundational for any religion are core theological doctrines and/or principles that express belief, meaning, and human relationship with the divine and natural world. These theological doctrines and/or principles provide an "official" and collective expression of one's faith.

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3. For a discussion of Christian cosmology, the reciprocal relationship between Christianity and the natural world, the theological idea of God as Creator, and God the source of Creation see Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).



This study, although inspired by theological ideas, was not seeking a theological understanding and/or some doctrinal meaning of human relationship with the divine and the natural world. Rather, this study explored how a person might describe and discover meaning from his or her lived experience of the divine in and through the natural world. The question is not asking what a person believes religiously and spiritually to be “nomological or factual,” but how they describe and find meaning from their lived experience that *embodies* the theological and religious beliefs. In other words this study was a phenomenological inquiry, not a theological discourse; though, it has been important to venture briefly into the broad theological doctrines that served as pre-understandings within the Christian tradition of my study participants.

### Statement of the Problem

In the early nineteenth century philosophers and theologians explored the phenomenon of religious lived experience in a variety of approaches. Early exemplary studies include William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, and Max Scheler’s *On the Eternal in Man*.<sup>4</sup> I have found most previous studies lacking in religious lived experiences of theologians, the very ones engaged in leading the discourse into what is the nature and relationship of God, human beings, and

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4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1982); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); and Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

Nature<sup>5</sup>. I desire to discover something much more grounded, particular, and enfleshed in a study of religious lived experience compared to the abundance of theoretical discourse.

There is power in describing, reflecting upon, and then sharing with others our lived experiences of the divine in and through Nature. What is it about sharing lived experience that makes it such a powerful medium of communication? A lived experience shared as story has the power to inspire and transform like nothing else, except perhaps a person's direct lived experience itself. I believe this can be important for the work of Christian theologians as their religious lived experiences remain undervalued and underutilized in much theology. The reasons for this undervaluing will be explored in Chapter 2: Literature Review.

There is a significant gap within theology: missing contemporary religious lived experiences of God's presence in the natural world as experienced by theologians. If theology is to succeed in helping inspire the faithful to embrace the healing of Earth as a moral responsibility, then contemporary theologians have a key contribution to make in guiding the Church in this endeavor. This study purports that one way theologians can make this contribution is to incorporate within their work personal narratives of their own lived experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature. The results of tapping in to this undervalued repository of experience could include a deepening of human relationship

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5. There are examples of religious lived experience within the literature, but these studies tend to be more theoretical. They talk about lived experience rather than studying specific examples of lived experience. William James does focus his study on specific examples, but they are pulled from secondary sources of information (drawing from literature, biography, etc.). What I do not find in the literature is a study of the actual religious lived experiences of Christian theologians.

with Nature and a growing understanding of human interconnectedness with Nature among people of faith. Christians reinforce belief and action by telling and retelling the collective Christian story. Theologians can help that story include caring interrelationship with the sacred natural world.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the religious lived experience of five Christian theologians; particularly their religious lived experience in and through the natural world. I wanted to explore the nature of this particular phenomenon as meaningfully experienced. What might my participants' experiences be like through more pre-reflective descriptions; a re-telling of their experiences as if they were re-living the experience again? How might they through their experiences and their descriptions of their experiences express a certain way of being in the world and what can we learn from that?

Through the gathering of descriptions of their lived experiences, listening to what they were saying as they reflected, and through my interpretation, I hoped to discover greater understanding of what it means for them to be in relationship with the Spirit and the natural world. Ultimately, it was my hope that what I would discover through this study would underscore the potential contribution of lived experience to ecotheology and provide specific examples to illustrate the types of experiences theologians could incorporate into their work of guiding Christianity within our contemporary environmental context.

## Research Questions

Each research question below begins with the word “how” or “what” to signify a wide-open inquisitiveness and receptivity to whatever might present itself through participants’ in-depth interviews. My research questions were:

1. How does each theologian experience the Spirit in and through Nature?
2. How does each make meaning of these experiences?
3. What do these experiences reveal about the value of embodied experience to theological understanding?

From this point I have selected the word Nature to express the entire natural world. The capitalization is intended to distinguish it from lowercase nature meaning the character or qualities of something.

## Significance of Study

The academic literature to which this study seeks to contribute includes phenomenology and theology. The category within phenomenology my contribution will most apply is with the literature studying religious lived experience. Within theology, my contribution will be most applicable to ecological theology.

The significance of this study to the literature of phenomenology is that it contributes rich descriptions and interpretations of theologians’ lived experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature. Within the literature of the phenomenology, I did not find any studies of the religious lived experiences of Christian theologians; and, therefore,

none that focused in particularly on religious lived experiences in and through Nature. Providing these contemporary examples is important because it brings a grounded reality to a discourse of these phenomena that tends to be more theoretical in nature, lacking descriptions and interpretations of actual religious lived experience. I should point out that William James, in his classic study *Varieties of Religious Experience*, does focus on examples of actual religious lived experience, but they are pulled from secondary sources of information (drawing from literature, biography, etc.). Whereas, my study, being interview-based, is pulled from primary sources in the form of first-hand accounts of actual religious lived experience.

Now I turn to the significance of this study to the literature of theology. Theologians also tend to write about the concept of experience but rarely share their personal religious lived experiences with the reader. Within the theological literature, Rudolf Otto's, *The Idea of the Holy*, is an example of theory-based exploration of the concept of religious experience. In contrast, my study will provide specific examples of contemporary theologian's religious lived experiences in and through Nature. My study seeks to elucidate how theologians might incorporate into their work their religious lived experiences in and through Nature.

My search for understanding of human religious lived experience in and through Nature, and what it means to be a human being in relationship with the world reflects an attempt to integrate thought from phenomenological philosophy, religious lived experience, and narrative. Exploration into the meaning of religious lived experience of the natural world, through a hermeneutic phenomenology, does not seek to find

prescriptive answers and “chiseled-in-stone” definitions. Rather insight and meaning of religious lived experience in and through Nature emerges from participants’ rich descriptions, imagery, and metaphor integrated with interpretation.

Inquiry into the nature of the relationship between the divine, human beings, and the natural world is of interest to theology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and other fields of study. Thus, the intended audiences for this study include: 1) professional Christian theologians engaged in the development of ecological theology; 2) professional and lay Christian ministers; 3) students of theology; 4) people of faith; and 5) phenomenologists and other scholars interested in studies of religious lived experience and/or lived experience of Nature.

### Navigating the Dissertation

The preface of this dissertation provides a personal narrative of one of my most meaningful religious lived experiences of Nature.. It serves to illustrate the power of the natural world in my own spiritual journey, illuminate how lived experience served to motivate my desire to conduct this study, and introduce my readers to an example of religious lived experience being grounded in the bodily senses and in a particular place and time. Chapter 1 continues the introduction with the statement of the research problem, statement of the research purpose, research questions, and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 provides an exploration into the literature and context that provides the rationale for my study. This exploration focuses on the following areas:

phenomenological lived experience, religious lived experience, the reasons behind the devaluing of lived experience, and Christian theology's call to return to lived experience as an important theological approach.

Chapter 3 offers a discussion of the hermeneutical phenomenological methodology and research design used for this dissertation. This discussion includes a brief restatement of the research questions, outlining the epistemological and ontological aspects of the methodology, the specific research steps that were followed, selection of the participants, my role as researcher and ethical considerations, gathering and interpreting data, and applicability of the research.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the research interviews. I present the lived experiences of each of my participants individually through narrative, thematic summaries, and analysis of the respective in-depth interviews, with one section devoted to each participant. This chapter concludes with a summary that briefly highlights convergent and contrasting themes and transitions into considering the research as a whole.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the research, through the framework of Max van Manen's four existentials, seeking more general applications for the research. There is a section devoted to each existential exploring an emerging theme related to that existential. The final section discusses the implications for theological practice.

Chapter 6 concludes this dissertation with an interdisciplinary reinforcement of the importance of seeking and sharing lived experiences a summary of my study, suggestions for further research, and closing thoughts.

## Chapter 2

### Literature of the Phenomenon

An “experience” . . . is a roughly datable mental event which is undergone by a subject and of which the subject is to some extent aware.

— Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*

#### Introduction: Navigating the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a foundation of understanding regarding lived experience as it relates to my study, to position where my study of lived experience lies within existing phenomenological literature, and to suggest that lived experience has a valid place within theology. To accomplish this, the review is organized according to the following sections: 1) A Story about the Power of Shared Lived Experience, 2) Exploring Lived Experience, 3) Exploring Religious Lived Experience, 4) The Enlightenment and Devaluing of Lived Experience, 5) Theology’s Call to Return to Lived Experience, and 6) Conclusion.

The transformative power of lived experience, both as directly experienced by a person and as indirectly experienced by others when made public as a shared story, is at the core of my research into Christian theologians’ lived experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature. Therefore, in the first section, *A Story about the Power of Shared Lived Experience*, I share a pivotal personal experience that underscores the power of lived experience made public. For the sake of term clarification, be aware that the concepts “lived experience made public” and “the story shared” are used synonymously



throughout the manuscript. I then reflect on that experience and what it illustrates about the transformative power of the story shared.

In the second section *Exploring Lived Experience*, I turn to how lived experience is generally defined by Max van Manen in phenomenological literature, including the role of reflection and meaning-making. Through the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I more thoroughly explore the bodily-sensory aspects of lived experience I briefly touched on in the Preface. Then I finish the section returning to Van Manen, touching on the four existential themes that guide phenomenology's investigation of lived experience.

The third section explores the phenomenology of religious lived experience. It begins with a simple definition of religious lived experience. Then it launches into a brief overview of the long and debate-filled history of religious lived experience as a phenomenological area of study, seeking to bring some organization for a better grasp of the field. Within the literature, I look primarily at the work of Georg W. F. Hegel; Sumner B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser, Jr.; and Jason N. Blum; and I position where in this field my study is rooted as well as some of the classic works on religious lived experience. Finally, I highlight the literature gap within phenomenology, where substantive studies of theologians' religious lived experience in and through Nature are virtually absent.

In the fourth section, *The Enlightenment and Devaluing of Lived Experience*, I reveal how, within the theological establishment, religious lived experience has been devalued historically to the point that theologians are reluctant to include their personal experiences of the divine in their work. I explore the Enlightenment's contribution to this

reluctance and to human separation from the natural world and the devaluing specifically of religious lived experience of Nature. I explore both theological and philosophical literature, primarily the work of Douglas John Hall, and Erazim Kohák.

In the fifth section, I amplify a call to return to lived experience from ecological theology, specifically ecopneumatology and ecofeminist theology. I primarily pull from the work of David Brown, Bernard Cooke, Sharon Betcher, Jürgen Moltmann, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Sallie McFague.

The final section, *Conclusion*, summarizes the key points of the literature review and how my study seeks to contribute to the literature and promote application of shared lived experience within ecological theology.

### A Story about the Power of Shared Lived Experience

In 2008 while attending the Forum on Religion and Ecology conference at Yale University, I had the opportunity to talk with Mark Wallace, Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. He has written a number of ecological theology books and papers regarding the study of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology). During one of our conversations Mark described the comments he had received from people who read his book *Finding God in the Singing River*.<sup>6</sup> He explained how the majority of comments pertained to people's resonance with his opening story about a

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6. Mark I. Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River: Christianity, Spirit, Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

special experience he had as a child while visiting coastal Mississippi. In contrast, he said, people would say very little about the scholarly theological content of the book.

As though on cue, another conference attendee approached and introduced himself. He shared that his daughter had been at Swarthmore and had Mark as a professor. He expressed how much he enjoyed Mark's story as a little boy in *Finding God in the Singing River*. He said it reminded him of some of his experiences growing up. In light of what Mark and I had discussed, we listened attentively for what the man would say next. But he did not offer any further comments about the theological content of Mark's book. He shook hands with Mark, expressed his appreciation again, and made his way to the refreshment table. Mark gave me a look as if to say, "See, I told you so!"

By the end of the conference I was pondering a number of questions. In a larger sense what is so powerful about sharing the stories of our lived experiences with each other? What qualities do lived experiences contain that speak so deeply about what it means to be human? Why did Mark's childhood experience resonate so strongly with his readers? I was, after all, one of them. I reflected on how it affected me the first time I had read *Finding God in the Singing River*. I recalled finding it to be a nice surprise and an engaging literary element in an otherwise academic theological treatise. It moved me emotionally and invited me to remember some of my own childhood experiences.

Our lived experiences, although unique and contextualized to each person, are actually more "universal," than the metanarratives of any given worldview (e.g., the modern Western worldview). What connects us is the specific, the concreteness of our lives, and the universals that reveal themselves from the particulars of our unique

personal lived experiences. Our lived experiences are “grounded” compared to the more abstract, theoretical universals applied to explain human nature. Our shared lived experiences have the quality of poetic images and metaphors that describe the concreteness of our world. Shared lived experiences invite our shared emotional and physical sensations and responses. And, there is the essential quality of lived experiences being deeply intersubjective and interpersonal.

There is no doubt that we powerfully resonate with and are shaped by our lived experiences when we share them with each other. Even more so, I believe that this sharing is intrinsic to our understanding of being in relationship. We begin relationships with the sharing and creating of experiences and stories. Our shared experiences and stories are at the core of understanding *who* we are as human beings, our identity, sense of purpose, and insight into our strengths and weaknesses. They shape our theological reflections, philosophical ideas, and scientific theories. We share and listen to each other’s lived experiences to affirm and inspire the very experiences and meaning of our lives. The stories of our lived experiences we live by are deeply embedded in all human cultures – past, present, and future.

Now, we turn to asking important questions of the key literature. What do we mean by lived experience? Are all our sensory perceptions legitimate lived experiences? More specific to this study, is what is meant by religious lived experience? What are the potential challenges in studying or championing lived experience? Below, we will explore these important questions as they have been investigated throughout some of the literature of phenomenology and theology.

## Exploring Lived Experience

Now that we have acknowledged the shared story as a powerful and transformative part of being human, it is time to focus in on the idea of there being significant lived experiences that precede the sharing of stories. We need to understand how the phenomenological literature defines lived experience, what characteristics make an experience significant enough to study, what role reflection and meaning-making have in the process of understanding lived experience, and the four existential themes which guide phenomenological study of lived experience.

Lived experience describes our pre-reflective experience of phenomena. Our lived experiences rely on our sensory encounters with and consciousness of phenomena every day. Our sensory impressions provide us with trivial and fleeting types of experiences, and significant and meaningful types of experiences.

The first type of experience we would not call profoundly meaningful. These are the daily mundane experiences that require of us very little reflection and/or need to seek any deeper meaning beyond the immediate experience and understanding that helps move us from one experience to the next. And most of the time we can be quite ambivalent and even oblivious to these abundant daily experiences. These “taken-for-granted” experiences are the ones where we maintain what phenomenology describes as the “natural attitude.”

The second type is the lived experiences that become foundational to our ontological and epistemological understanding. Phenomenological investigation of lived experiences is the moving from our “natural attitude” to the “phenomenological attitude.”

There is both reflecting on how we experience and on the meanings of our lived experiences.

Referring to the work of philosopher William Dilthey, phenomenological educator Max van Manen describes the basic form of lived experience: “lived experience involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life: a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, our lived experiences begin with our immediate and natural consciousness of a certain phenomenon. It is only later as we reflect upon our experience that we can apprehend and describe what the experience was like and how it is meaningful.

A lived experience cannot happen concurrently with reflection since we are not capable of doing both simultaneously. “Phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through. . . . Lived experience can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence.”<sup>8</sup>

We experience the world through our bodies and this corporeal nature of our lives is critical for phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty affirms the centrality of our body to our experience, “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them. . . . I am conscious of my body *via*

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7. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 35.

8. *Ibid.*, 10, 36.

the world . . . I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body.”<sup>9</sup> And, later, Van Manen confirmed, “Phenomenological research does not start or proceed in a disembodied fashion.”<sup>10</sup>

In fact, embodiment is one of the four existential themes that guide phenomenological reflection as described by Van Manen. The existential themes are: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived relation (relationality).<sup>11</sup> Van Manen gives equal weight to the exploration of these themes as he describes a method of phenomenological investigation. However, it is significant to point out that without lived body the other existential themes would not exist as we currently experience and understand them.

How can we have consciousness of something without first experiencing it in some way in and through our bodies and senses? I do not believe we can. Too much Western thought dismissed the physical nature of human beings, emphasizing the mind as supreme, *sola mentis*. But consciousness does not emerge from one’s detached, rational self. Consciousness comes from sensory perceptions. And then our consciousness spirals back to being bodily in the world (lived experience), and back to reflection upon the “world as real and meaningful” (lived meaning).<sup>12</sup>

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9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 94-95.

10. *Ibid.*, 31.

11. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 101-9.

12. *Ibid.*, 183.

Before transitioning into the following section which focuses more closely on religious lived experience, I will make one final point about corporeality (lived body). While the above exploration has focused on the phenomenological literature, I want to also briefly mention that corporeality is also acknowledged within theological literature. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann upholds this reality of our corporeal-sensory nature, negating the duality of the age of reason (18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment):

According to the Western view – and especially the modern Western view – the human being (which pre-eminently means the man) is the subject of reason and will. His bodily nature plays no part. The life of his sense is subordinate. But we acquire most of our experiences neither through our consciousness, nor through our reason, nor as the result of any deliberate intention. We perceive the happenings that affect us by way of our senses. They affect our bodies. They penetrate the unconscious levels of our psyche. And it is probably only a small segment of our experiences of which we are conscious, and which is ‘acquired’ by the reason in the exercise of its reflective and interpretive activity.<sup>13</sup>

### Exploring Religious Lived Experience

Given that my study explores religious lived experience in and through Nature, which is one expression of the larger category of religious lived experience, it is important to understand how the literature has defined and studied religious lived experience. By way of simple definition, religious lived experience is the immediate pre-reflective consciousness of encounter with the phenomenon of the divine (or God, or the Spirit.) Here is where simplicity ends regarding this field, for the literature of phenomenology reveals a complex and convoluted history of debate and study. I will attempt to give a brief overview and position where in this field my study is rooted.

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13. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 20.



Finally, I highlight the literature gap within phenomenology, where substantive studies of theologians' religious lived experience in Nature are virtually absent.

Religious lived experience has been a significant area of study in phenomenology, tracing its philosophical discussion back to the beginning of the 1800s with Georg W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.<sup>14</sup> A central concern for Hegel was that of consciousness and an all-encompassing Spirit found in human beings and the whole world. Since Hegel, the philosophical inquiry of the phenomenology of religion has diversified greatly. For some commentators, this diversity of voices had led to the following schism among philosophers: 1) philosophers who are explicitly following the phenomenological method as initially envisaged by Edmund Husserl, and 2) philosophers whose phenomenological investigations are much broader in approach and interpretation. Complicating this debate even further, many wonder whether phenomenology of religion is a theological enterprise, a scientific enterprise, and/or a cultural study. Of particular note for my interests, its primary distinction from theology is that it "typically brackets or lays aside metaphysical questions of the real existence of the sacred or the divine."<sup>15</sup>

Although the myriad questions and critiques are necessary and provide for a lively interdisciplinary dialogue, what is pertinent for this study is to focus on the common outcome found throughout this divergent philosophical community: "Basic to the phenomenological investigation of religion is the description of the essence of religious

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14. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

15. Sumner B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser, Jr., eds., *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 2.

experience as reflected in a variety of modes of expression.”<sup>16</sup> Jason Blum suggests that the paramount questions for the phenomenology of religion are: “How does this particular religious individual or community regard these phenomena, and what meaning do they have for him/[her]/them?”<sup>17</sup> Blum’s description of the intent of this field of inquiry is particularly helpful in understanding what it is and is not:

Phenomenology of religion is not keyed to offer explanations of religion, and especially not in naturalistic or social scientific terms. However, it is well equipped to offer an interpretation of religion, or of religious experience and consciousness. It is this interpretive function that should define phenomenology of religion, and which sets it apart from social scientific or naturalistic methods that seek to explain religion.<sup>18</sup>

The phenomenology of religion also continues to be a significant interdisciplinary dialogue partner in seeking insight into the nature of the relationship and experience between humans and the divine. This back and forth dialogue with other disciplines has resulted in phenomenology of religion being influential with “such established traditions outside itself as philosophy, history, and psychology as well as such fresh new postmodern modes of criticism as deconstruction and the hermeneutics of gender.”<sup>19</sup> Additional traditions have included sociology and theology. My point in sharing this is to highlight that because this discipline of phenomenology has been in interdisciplinary

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16. David Stewart and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology: A Guide to the Field and its Literature*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990), 123.

17. Jason N. Blum, “Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 8, no. 4 (December 2012): 1031.

<sup>18</sup>. Ibid., 1029.

19. Twiss and Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, 2.

dialogue for so long, it will be familiar and hopefully feel accessible to those within the theological realm I am seeking to reach through my work.

To help bring order to the diverse historical development of the phenomenology of religion, Twiss and Conser compare it “to a musical composition that contains three separate but related voices – the essential, the historical-typological, and the existential-hermeneutical . . .”<sup>20</sup> For each voice Twiss and Conser selected essays from some of the classical works of phenomenology of religion as well as contemporary works that include contributions from philosophy, anthropology and history of religion, and psychology.

Those Twiss and Conser include in the *essential voice* share the primary aim “to describe and analyze those experiences and concepts uniquely characteristic of religious consciousness.” Essentialists seek out the essence or true meaning of a believer’s religious consciousness that includes his or her religious “apprehensions, emotions, motivations, and activities distinctive to the believing soul who claims to live his or her life in full recognition of a transcendent or sacred dimension of human experience.”<sup>21</sup>

The *historical-typological voice* is the “type of inquiry . . . undertaken primarily by historians of religions interested both in the distinctive ethos and worldviews of particular religious traditions and in persistent or recurrent patterns shared by those traditions.” Historical-typologists share two primary aims and two subsidiary aims of inquiry. The first aim is to achieve a qualitative understanding of the meaning of the particular religion’s elements from adherents’ worldviews. They are curious about “what

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20. Twiss and Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, 1-2.

21. *Ibid.*, 8.

the ‘external’ facts of a tradition add up to when understood and viewed as expressions of distinctive worldviews and existentially experienced standpoints of life and the world.”

The second aim “is an historically contextualized understanding of a particular tradition’s ethos and worldview.” The third (subsidiary) aim is a “systematic comparison of the standpoint of one tradition with the standpoint of other traditions.”<sup>22</sup> And the fourth (subsidiary) aim is “to identify ‘universal’ or at least ‘recurrent’ patterns features common to particular religious traditions—that is *types* of phenomena shared by traditions.”<sup>23</sup>

The *existential-hermeneutical voice* is where my study is rooted because of this voice’s acknowledgement of the nature of human experience being grounded in the world, corporeal, intersubjective, and mediated by language and interpretation. Twiss and Conser describe this voice with precise definitions of the two terms “existential” and “hermeneutical,” and emphasize their important connection:

“Existential” refers to this voice’s preoccupation with structures and problems of human existence in the world, including such broad themes as freedom, intersubjectivity, temporality, corporeality, finitude, and death as well as particular human experiences such as anxiety, hope, despair, guilt, and caring.

“Hermeneutical” refers to this voice’s perception that all human experience is mediated by language (or, more broadly symbolic systems). The linkage of the two – “existential” and “hermeneutical” – indicates this voice’s further perception that all structures and problems of human existence and experience require an approach explicitly focused on exploring them through interpretation of their linguistic or symbolic expressions.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Twiss and Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, 24-6.

23. *Ibid.*, 26.

24. *Ibid.*, 44.

Existential-hermeneutists bring to their inquiry of the phenomenology of religion more transparency of intent in their aims compared to the first two voices. Essentialists' and historical-typologists' constant bracketing out of normative existential themes is due to their concern about the potential biasing of data. Existential-hermeneutists do not share this concern but set about their task through six shared understandings or themes. Twiss and Conser, referring to Paul Ricoeur's scholarship, describe these themes: "They are: (1) "consciousness is bound to a pre-given world," (2) "we are incarnated," (3) "we are temporal or historical," (4) "we are essentially related to others in an intersubjective world," (5) "we are linguistic beings through and through," and (6) "we are free."<sup>25</sup> These themes radically express phenomenology's *back-to-the-things-themselves* being deeply oriented in the world, defining itself, "precisely around the clear acknowledgment that we are indissolubly our bodies and are indissolubly bound within an intersubjective world of conscious (and unconscious) relations." Existential phenomenologists critique other phenomenologies that do not orient themselves within the world saying that they suffer from "fundamental shortsightedness (or even incoherence) in their aims and method."<sup>26</sup>

Let us take a look at where a few of the classic studies of religious experience fit into these categories. They identify the theologian Rudolf Otto along with philosopher Max Scheler as the "founding fathers" of the "essential" voice. Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, an inquiry into human experience of the "non-rational numinous" (i.e., experiences

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25. Twiss and Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, 46.

26. Ibid.

of the mysteriousness of God).<sup>27</sup> Also in this category is Max Scheler's *On the Eternal in Man* which describes the essence of religious experience as a "sphere" within human beings that essentially makes them what they are.<sup>28</sup> Within the "historical-typological" voice is historian/philosopher Mircea Eliade. His famous work, *The Sacred and the Profane*, offers a comparative study of religious and secular experiences between "pre-modern religious man" and "modern non-religious man."<sup>29</sup> And finally, the "existential-hermeneutical" voice is characterized by Paul Ricoeur. One example of Ricoeur's work is *The Symbolism of Evil* where he investigates how we make sense of and come to terms with evil through language, symbols, and myths.<sup>30</sup>

These different voices reiterate the diversity of approaches toward understanding within the phenomenology of religious experience. And although Twiss and Conser make significant distinctions among the voices, they also point out their interrelatedness. The intermingling of "the three voices interact with one another, shaping the overall melody and contrapuntally contributing their parts to the resonance and power of the composition as a whole. This phenomenological composition has a certain unfinished

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27. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

28. Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

29. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Williams R. Trask (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1987).

30. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

character to it. For it not only continues in the present, it also influences such established traditions outside itself as already described above.”<sup>31</sup>

This suggests that out of these diverse expressions there is ample opportunity for the phenomenological researcher to explore religious experience. These melodies exist for the simple purpose of better understanding religious lived experience. They hint at the following meanings or ways of understanding religious experience: 1) an ontological process of becoming and being, a continual transformation of self through our religious experience; 2) a relationship with an immanent-transcendent Other; 3) a sense of the sublime (i.e., awe, terror, beauty, power); and 4) a teleological progression, or final purpose or end for the universe.

Another classical work within phenomenological religious lived experience that Twiss and Conser did not include in their study is psychologist-philosopher William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>32</sup> James investigates religious lived experiences through the literary works and lives of Walt Whitman, Mary Baker Eddy, Leo Tolstoy, John Bunyan, Augustine of Hippo, and Henry Alline, providing specific narrative examples, thus distinguishing it from the works of the others mentioned previously. I find James getting closer to offering actual descriptions of religious lived experience. But, different from my research approach of direct interviews with theologians, James drew upon secondary sources of information (examples from literature, biography, etc. – already published and interpreted “lived experiences”). A

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31. Twiss and Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, 2.

32. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

step closer, to be sure, than the approaches found in Otto, Scheler, Eliade, and Ricoeur toward exploring actual descriptions of religious lived experience.

As insightful as the classic and contemporary studies and Twiss and Conser's compilation of the phenomenological voices may be, my criticism is that although very thought-provoking through their respective approaches, most of them lack descriptions and interpretations of actual religious lived experiences of theologians. Although it is assumed their respective philosophical contemplations were inspired by many of their own and/or others' religious lived experiences (i.e., William James, for sure). However, descriptive narratives of religious lived experiences themselves are virtually absent from the classical works of the phenomenological of religion.

Additionally, my delving into the literature of phenomenology of religious experience, like that of theology, has produced few substantive examples of what I would consider as rich descriptions of lived experiences specifically of the divine in and through Nature. Given that phenomenology is interested in religious lived experience, and that there is a growing theological interest in experience and in our relationship with Nature, this study could benefit both phenomenological and theological understanding and help to begin filling gaps within the literature.

### The Enlightenment and Devaluing of Lived Experience

In this section I explore the reasons behind the theological literature gap (missing shared lived experience). I cover how 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment contributed to the



devaluing of experience, to human separation from the natural world, and to the devaluing of religious lived experience in and through Nature. I end the section with a glance at how postmodernist theologies are beginning to counteract modernism's continuing negative influence.

In Western Christian theology there is an apparent devaluing of experience that leaves theologians, at best, tentative about sharing their own experiences. They might describe the experiences of mystics, saints, and long-dead theologians. Stories are told of Jesus, the twelve apostles, Augustine, Origen, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Francis of Assisi, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and on and on. These are the lives of long ago, doctrines long established, the path most trodden. These peoples' experiences are beyond suspicion since their stories continue to be shared and discussed throughout generations of the tradition. But one's own experiences are not valued when it comes down to "serious" theological scholarship or doctrine interpretation. The script is set, tested by time and those who came before.

What is the reason for this devaluing of religious lived experience within the theological establishment? The probable answer lies in the fact that we still live under the shadow of Enlightenment's objectivism and rationalism. The God who once controlled the universe, bringing order and harmony to the chaos of the natural world was dethroned. Enchantment of pre-modern times was chased away by the proposed "real-world," a world devoid of superstition that rejected absolutism and tradition. It was the rise of individualism, autonomy, humanism, secularism, industrialism, capitalism, and by the twentieth century a technological and informational global society. Human

fragmentation from the natural world also was the result of these tenets of abstract logic and dispassionate reason. Detachment led to “objective” truths about the social and non-human world. Through reason human beings could supposedly control their own destinies and become the masters rising above their once chaotic living world.

According to modern Western scientific and religious worldviews “pre-scientific” human cultures and religions represented the uneducated, non-rational, and primitive. The stories and experiences of the divine in and through the natural world were deprecated or simply ignored as quaint superstitions and mythologies. The true nature of human beings was to rise above and become their own masters over Nature and superstitious beliefs. Humans through reason believed they were no longer subject to interconnected relationships with the natural world. The world was for humans to use, abuse, make better, manipulate, and destroy if it was profitable and helped pull humanity out of the drudgery and poverty of daily living. This elevated modern Western worldview expressed itself in anthropocentrism, rationality, and dualistic thinking reinforcing human separateness and disembodiment from the rest of Nature.

Within Christian theology there occurred a detachment from Nature as well. Creation as a theological inquiry was passed over in favor of a sole focus on God and the human self. This neglect of the natural world with the growing individualistic and humanistic trends brought forth an anthropocentrism and egocentrism that replaced the

more “natural theology” and religious experience of the natural world.<sup>33</sup> “The irony,” as described by theologian Douglas John Hall,

of what modernity dreamed of as humanity’s mastery of nature and ‘the overcoming of chance’ is now visible for all who can bear the sight: in the moment of conquering nature, humanity, being part of nature, must itself be conquered, hoisted by its own petard. . . . I suspect that we must experience a far more profound exposure to the *demise* of modernity than we have yet experienced, as a people, before we can acquire sufficient humility to learn another way of being in the world.<sup>34</sup>

A similar idea expressing human separation from the natural world due to the Enlightenment and modernity’s rationalism is expressed by philosopher Erazim Kohák. He described the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western worldview as “primordially, radically counter-intuitive” to human existence and being in intersubjective relationship with the natural world. The modern Western worldview was a human construct built on reason and objectivism that ended up disconnecting humans from the world they sought to understand. Kohák argues that the intersubjective relationships are an experiential given within human existence and ontology.<sup>35</sup>

Hall and other Christian theologians of our time of Postmodernity have begun picking up the pieces of Modernity’s fragmented worldview and its disastrous new

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33. For discussion, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). “Natural theology” is human knowledge of God through God’s revelation in Nature and available to human reason. It is theologically controversial, being accepted more in the Roman Catholic tradition and for some Protestants (e.g. Emil Brunner and Paul Tillich). However, for other Protestants (e.g. Karl Barth) the idea is rejected.

34. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 37, 41.

35. Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

order.<sup>36</sup> Though we have a long way to go, many rearrangements, mosaics, and constructions within theology have been developed over the last sixty or so years to address such issues as the horrors of world wars, genocide, oppression, totalitarianism, hierarchy, sexism, and environmental destruction. Examples of these postmodern theological movements include: liberation theology, process theology, feminist theology, queer theology, narrative theology, and ecological theology. My study taps into a shoot growing from the roots of the ecological theologies of the 1960s and 1970s, roots that have been slow to take hold but now seem to be gaining momentum.

### Theology's Call to Return to Lived Experience

I have discovered a hopeful call for the return of lived experience within theology. A number of theologians are pursuing a renewed inquiry into lived experience and its importance to theological and spiritual development. Many of these theologians' work falls within the more recent literature of two postmodern movements within ecological theology: ecopneumatology (ecological thought related specifically to studies of the Spirit); and ecofeminist theology.

Over the last few decades the literature of ecological theology (ecological thought integrated with biblical and theological interpretation and socio-historical environmental realities) has been growing, producing thoughtful fruit for addressing the myriad

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36. Postmodern or postmodernity is defined as a "description of a contemporary intellectual and cultural climate as a stage beyond the "modernism" introduced by the Enlightenment. It is marked by a rejection of "objective truth," the powers of reason, and claims of universality. Texts and symbols are emphasized together with a corporate understanding of truth that is relative to each community in which one participates. Source: Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 214.

ecological challenges through faith and religious community. Pneumatology in particular is having a renaissance and it is ripe for exploring ecological issues. A great influence to the development of ecopneumatology has been ecofeminist aspects of religious study and theology, particularly regarding exploration into gender questions and alternative models about the nature of God. These explorations have been prominent in feminist theology for decades. However, “. . . in recent years the Spirit has been the place where these explorations have been most fruitfully and provocatively answered. Throughout scripture and the tradition, the Spirit, as God’s indwelling, corporeal presence within the created order, has been variously identified with the feminine and the maternal.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Ecopneumatology*

In current ecopneumatological literature, a growing number of theologians are creatively engaged in reinterpretations of the Spirit that are authentically rooted in the biblical story, while at the same time, attempting to address today’s environmental crisis. Themes that emerge in this literature are often concerned with the immanence of the Spirit present with us in and through Creation. Therefore, embodiment, incarnation, and experience are explored within the context of the immanent Spirit.

David Brown called for rediscovering sacramental enchantment of the world through the reclaiming of human experience. He argued that much of religious literature has failed to recognize the importance of material context (i.e., places of worship, art,

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37. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 241.

gardens, the natural world, sports) as mediating experiences of the sacred.<sup>38</sup> Bernard Cooke articulated it this way: “At the center of this theological reflection is the awareness that it is in *faith experience* that this pneumatological explosion is rooted, and it is this experience . . . that needs to be mined for its riches.”<sup>39</sup> Sharon Betcher reflected on how God’s Spirit has become an abstract notion: “By severing body from Spirit and by withholding our bodies from the earth, by curtailing Spirit’s ‘allowable’ affiliations with flesh, Spirit’s range of motion has been severely diminished. As Spirit became abstracted from the thick relations of ecological situatedness, Spirit slipped from sight, from practice, from theology.”<sup>40</sup> And succinctly stated by Jürgen Moltmann: “There are no words of God without human experiences of God’s Spirit.”<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary theologians’ reinterpretations of God’s Spirit, God in Nature, and human relationship with Nature, in light of today’s ecological issues are essential for the Christian community in working toward an appropriate faith-oriented environmental ethic and response.<sup>42</sup> But, why are they not describing their religious lived experiences—

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38. David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

39. Bernard Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God: Toward an Experience-Based Pneumatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 179.

40. Sharon Betcher, “Grounding the Spirit,” in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, eds. Laura Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 330.

41. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 3

42. In addition to Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, Cooke *Power and the Spirit of God*, and Moltmann *The Spirit of Life*; see Denis Edwards, *Breath of life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Hall, *Thinking the Faith*; Hessel and Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology*; Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*; Kearns and Keller, *Ecospirit*; Catherine Keller, *On the*

telling their stories? The remnants of Enlightenment thought has already been covered in the previous section, but might there be other reasons specifically inherent within theology also at play?

Perhaps some of the fault lies in a fundamental flaw underlying much theology of contemporary Christianity and popular religious practice—the flaw being vilification of the corporeal due to misinterpretation of transcendence. It has been stuck on the unfortunate supremacy of transcending human experience within the world, resulting in separation from the world and vilification of the body—and this division or duality is the ugly side of transcendence. People must escape their sinful and finite bodies for the ultimate state of utopian bliss floating forever with God as angelic spirits in a far off heaven. The pious apologetically refer to their shortcomings as having “feet of clay” and aspire to “be not *of* the world.” And the “use it or lose it” argument is applied to Earth because it is here for the “use” of “man” (sic).

Human nature and experience is both a transcendent and immanent process. When experience is immanent within the moments of life, it is more likely to motivate mindful living in intimate relationship to place, others, and the divine. Immanence honors experience in the here and now and resonates with the sacredness of the natural

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*Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987); Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Darby Kathleen Ray, ed., *Theology that Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Mark I. Wallace, *Green Christianity: Five Ways to a Sustainable Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Wallace, *Finding God in the Singing River*; Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

world. When experience is transcendent in a beautiful way, we can overcome the dark side of ego such as selfishness, individualism, arrogance, greed, guilt, extremism, and dominance. When transcendence and immanence balance each other we can reap the upside of ego: self-care, relatedness, self-restraint, moderation, cooperation, contentedness, and awareness of self within the whole.

### *Ecofeminist Theology*

The call to return to experience is also coming from ecofeminist theologians. Feminist theologies seek to ground theology in the experience of women. These theologians emphasize the experience of women related to patriarchy, the suppression of women, and justice concerns. In an overt rejection of rationalism, dualism and objectification, feminist theologians instead uphold embodiment, interdependence, and intersubjectivity.<sup>43</sup>

“The basic assumption of ecofeminist theology . . . ,” as discussed by Rosemary Radford Reuther, “is that the dualism of soul and body must be rejected, as well as the assumptions of the priority and controlling role of male-identified mind over female-identified body. This anthropology is at the heart of the distortion in Western thought of our relation to ourselves, as well as to our fellow earth creatures and the cosmos as a

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43. Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).



whole.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Sallie McFague pointed out, “If nature is a part of us, so we are a part of nature; that is, not only are we body, but nature is spirit (or subject, soul—whatever we call that part of ourselves that we consider ‘more than’ nature).”<sup>45</sup>

Further, McFague explained, “what is needed is not only immanent models of God, but a way of thinking of God’s transcendence in an immanent way.”<sup>46</sup> What she proposed is a reinterpretation and combining of two traditional models of God found within Christianity: the ancient organic model (the world as the body of God) and the agential (God as the spirit of the body). With radical emphasis on “embodiment,” McFague hopes that an agential-organic model will help us think about God and bodies in a new way promoting ecological healing.

According to McFague, all bodies are dependent upon the breath of the Spirit that is poured out upon all flesh. This shared experience within the Spirit has the potential to move us toward a more intrinsic valuing of all other bodies. As we perceive of ourselves as being inspirited bodies among all other inspirited bodies, we learn to value the sameness of our experience within the Spirit.

Ecofeminist theology emphasis on the experience of women, overcoming dualisms of body and spirit, radical embodiment, alternative models of the nature of God, relationality, and pneumatological dimensions is fertile ground for dialogue with

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44. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 103.

45. McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 104.

46. McFague, *The Body of God*, vii.

phenomenology of religious lived experience in and through Nature. However, ecofeminist theologies are still hamstrung by the dominant tenants of theology. It is one thing to talk about the need for greater emphasis on women's experience, but there is still a shying away from feminist theologians offering rich descriptions of their own lived experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature.

### Conclusion

Having now covered key literature in phenomenology and theology exploring lived experience, the reader is better prepared to understand the role of the shared lived experience in this study. I have suggested some of the reasons there is a dearth of theologians' religious lived experiences of Nature in their theological work, and, yet, that there are theologians calling for a greater emphasis on lived experience.

I hope my study can be an affirmation for those theologians calling for renewed attention to lived experience and that my study can underscore the value of shared lived experience for theological work, particularly ecotheological work. Multiple approaches exist to propel the theological journey, and, while not replacing objective-rational theological scholarship, it is time for lived experience to be brought back to the table of serious theology. I uphold the transformative power of lived experience and the shared stories (narratives) that emerge from experience. Theology could benefit from embracing the valuing of lived experience that underlies my phenomenological methodology.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology and Research Design

Most people are *on* the world, not in it – have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them – undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate.

—John Muir, *John of the Mountains*

#### Introduction

I begin this chapter with an orientation to hermeneutic phenomenology as it evolved within the phenomenological movement. This brief overview is important for the reader to understand hermeneutic phenomenology as both a research methodology and a philosophical tradition. Following, I define the significant terms for this study; outline the steps of my research design, including how I selected my participants, gathered their lived experiences (data collection), and interpreted the data (anecdotes/narrative texts); describe the applicability of the research; and conclude with my role as a researcher and ethical considerations.

#### Orientation to Hermeneutic Phenomenology

I selected a hermeneutic phenomenological research design for gathering, describing and interpreting the meaning of my participants' lived experiences of the divine in the natural world.

Epistemologically, phenomenology seeks “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world” through reflective writing and textual development.<sup>47</sup> The reflective text is achieved through a hermeneutic phenomenological practice of writing. Hermeneutic phenomenology describes and interprets lived experience in an attempt to discover the rich meaning embodied in human encounters of the world’s phenomena.

The epistemology of experience, perception, language, and text characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenology is ontological in nature. Ontologically speaking, hermeneutic phenomenology seeks the meaning of lived experience and what it means to “be” or our “being” from intersubjective relationships with the world.

Phenomenology is a diverse and complex European philosophical tradition first articulated by Edmund Husserl in the beginning of the twentieth century. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena and consciousness; the way things present themselves to us through our perception and experience. As both a general philosophical movement and research method into understanding human consciousness and experience, phenomenology has been highly influential to and/or coupled with such thought as structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, hermeneutics, existentialism, postmodernism, multiculturalism, analytical philosophy, philosophy of religion, and most recently ecology.<sup>48</sup>

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47. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

48. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Stewart and Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology*.

The concept of intentionality plays a critical role in phenomenological philosophy. Intentionality refers to the idea that our consciousness is always consciousness of some object or phenomenon. Consciousness is never empty, abstract, or closed to the things of the world. Human thinking expresses inseparability with the world. Unlike Descartes' proclamation, "I think, therefore I am," phenomenology counters with "I think of *something*, therefore I am." Descartes' philosophy extracts human consciousness from the rest of the world in an attempt to create an absolute principle or truth for philosophy. However, this left Descartes "with *cogito* that was empty, a mere thinking thing (*res cogita*) with no guarantee that there was anything to think about."<sup>49</sup> Phenomenology, on the other hand, argues that the thinking thing (human beings) is thinking of a world full of other things, whether these things are trees and birds and/or ideas like love and hope.

Husserl called for a return to concrete, sensory human experience of the world: "we must go back to the 'things themselves.'"<sup>50</sup> To truly understand a phenomenon, we had to be in intimate contact with the "thing" in order to grasp and describe its essence. For Husserl this required a definitive move away from our "natural attitude," our prephilosophical, taken-for-granted, unquestioning, default perspectives of the phenomena of the world. He argued for a "philosophical attitude" or what he defined as the "phenomenological reduction." This required a person to "bracket" or set-aside their prejudices, biases, preunderstandings, and beliefs of the world in order to arrive at true consciousness of the presuppositional essence of a phenomenon. Husserl's philosophy

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49. Steward and Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology*, 8.

50. Moran and Mooney, eds., *The Phenomenology Reader*, 67.

developed as a “transcendental phenomenology” that emphasized consciousness and description of the pure essences of phenomena:

. . . Husserl opens up the field of phenomenology as that science which maps the a priori essential possibilities of knowledge in general, entirely distinct from the different kinds of factual embodiments of cognition in humans, animals, and even imagined beings such as angels or Martians. Moreover, Husserl believed such essential forms could be intuited through imaginative variation and rotation of possibilities in consciousness. This would eventually lead to him espousing a form of transcendental idealism where all meanings and essences are already embedded somehow in the transcendental ego.<sup>51</sup>

Husserl’s transcendental idealism came under attack by his student Martin Heidegger and other phenomenological proponents. Husserl was criticized for his dependency on the philosophical idealism of Immanuel Kant and René Descartes dualistic philosophy. Although Husserl described his phenomenology as contra dualistic his argument for “consciousness” as *a priori* (existing in the mind independent of experience) or that which presupposed experience undermined his claim to non-dualism. In addition, Husserl’s transcendental idealism was rejected for its lack of interpretation to discover the essence of a phenomenon. Husserl maintained that phenomenological description, all by itself, without the additional of interpretation was all that was necessary for understanding the pure essence of a phenomenon.<sup>52</sup> Heidegger rejected Husserl’s transcendental idealism and adherence to pure description alone.

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51. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 106.

52. Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*; Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*; Stewart and Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology*.

Heidegger was only one year old when, on July 16, 1890, Muir wrote the lines in this chapter's epigraph in his journal while camping on a glacier in Alaska.<sup>53</sup> Although Muir was alone in the wilderness, waxing superlative and poetic about his experience of this beloved glacial landscape, concern about human separation from the rest of Nature welled up in his contemplations.

Nearly 40 years later Heidegger's "being-in-the-world," emulating Muir's observation, brought about a profound turn in phenomenological philosophy; hermeneutic phenomenology. Muir, the mountain prophet, and Heidegger, the continental philosopher, shared a disturbing insight about human separation from the rest of the natural world: the unnatural shallow *on* existence versus the natural deep *in* existence of human nature. Both had an idea of what it meant to be truly in the world and not over and against the world—to have a profound consciousness of human *being* in relationship to one another, animals, plants, and ecological systems.

Philosopher Hubert L. Dreyfus explains that Heidegger understood that the core meaning of *in* was, "to reside," "to dwell."

What Heidegger is getting at is a mode of being-in we might call 'inhabiting.' When we inhabit something, it is no longer an object for us but becomes part of us and pervades our relation to other objects in the world. Both Heidegger and [philosopher] Michael Polanyi call this way of being-in 'dwelling.' Polanyi points out that we dwell in our language; we feel at home in it and relate to objects and other people through it. Heidegger says that same for the world. . . . The relation between me and what I inhabit cannot be understood on the model of the relation between subject and object.<sup>54</sup>

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53. John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. Linnie March Wolfe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 320.

54. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being in Time, Division I* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1992), 42.

I think this same sense of “inhabiting” was what John Muir was expressing when he bemoaned people’s lack of “conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them.”<sup>55</sup> Muir felt that too many people were missing this indwelling connection, resulting in an unnatural separation of humans from the natural world (a dis-inhabiting or a rigid and limited subject-object state of existence).

We humans are always already in the world in which we find ourselves. Our ideas, moods, understandings, philosophies, sciences, and religious lived experiences are intrinsically rooted within our relationships with the natural world, whether or not we are aware of this intersubjectivity. Becoming aware of intersubjectivity is crucial to the transformative power of lived experience.

Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology became an ontological one or a being-focused phenomenology that relied on interpretation for discovering the meaning of human experience. Still championing the same declaration to “the things themselves,” he did not accept an *a priori* of “consciousness” as it related to the world. In fact, consciousness for Heidegger is derived from our “being-in-the-world” and not *a priori* or transcendent reality. “The meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in *interpretation*,” explained Heidegger. “The phenomenology of Dasein [human existence] is a *hermeneutic* in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting.”<sup>56</sup>

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55. John Muir, *John of the Mountains*, 320.

56. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 61-62.



Hermeneutics, described as an art of interpretation, has its origins in ancient Greece and was primarily used for the interpretation of sacred texts well into the nineteenth century. As the notion evolved it was expanded by Wilhelm Dilthey to include not only texts, but other realities as well. Heidegger, influenced by Dilthey, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and theological hermeneutics, had gone on to expand it to include all human activity.<sup>57</sup>

However, Heidegger's philosophy and life are not without some controversy that continues to be debated to this day. Particularly problematic for Heidegger's phenomenology was his entanglement with the rise of National Socialism in 1930s Nazi Germany.<sup>58</sup> In 1933, Heidegger became a member of the National Socialist Party. During that same year he was appointed by the National Socialist Party as rector of the University of Freiburg. However, Heidegger resigned from that position the following year supposedly finding it difficult to conform to the new regime.<sup>59</sup> Because of his

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57. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works, Volume IV: Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, eds. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton University Press, 2010); Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*; Steward and Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology*.

58. It is important to understand that all philosophical movements have a specific context(s) within which they develop. As Dermot Moran states: "Despite its initial open antipathy towards history, phenomenology, like all philosophical movements, was shaped by the particular historical and cultural circumstances of its foundations. It was unavoidable, therefore, that phenomenology's fortunes should become tangled up in the history of the twentieth century and the impact of the world wars." Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 17.

59. Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006), 17.

association with Nazism he was banned from teaching at Freiburg after the war; however, he continued sharing his philosophy through private seminars.<sup>60</sup>

One problematic example of Heidegger's phenomenology was his apparent turning to "a single, surpassing, great 'Origin' (*Ursprung*), a primordial incipience or 'Beginning' (*Anfang*) of the West" based on Greek history, culture, and mythology which coincided with Nazi ideology.<sup>61</sup> Philosopher John D. Caputo refers to this shift for Heidegger as the "Great Greek Beginning" that became the metanarrative for the "myth of Being" underlying Heidegger's 1930s and later phenomenology. Caputo summarizes the evolution he sees in Heidegger's thinking:

From its inception, Heidegger's thought has been bound up with certain religious and theological concerns. One can effectively trace the path of Heidegger's *Denkweg* [thinking] by following the course of his changing religious views. The myth of Being first takes shape in the 1930s, precisely at the point at which Heidegger moves beyond the God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It appears first in harsh, heroic mythic tones, in keeping with its Nazi provenance, and then afterwards in the softer mythopoetic tones of the Fourfold, of the kinder, gentler worlding of the world and thinking of the thing. In the 1920s Heidegger took the jewgreek world of biblical Christianity seriously and moved in a demythologizing, ontologizing direction. From the 1930s on, Jews and Christians were shown the door and replaced by a pantheon of "pagan" "gods," pure Greeks, and celebrated in an openly mythologizing thinking, which culminated in the hope that one day one of them would come along and save us.<sup>62</sup>

Drawing upon the discourses from Jacques Derrida (law and justice), Emmanuel Levinas (biblical justice), and Jean François Lyotard (quasi Aristotelianized "pagan" justice), Caputo deconstructs (demythologizing) and reconstructs (remythologizing)

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60. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, *The Phenomenology Readers*, 246.

61. John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1.

62. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 169.

Heidegger's thought from the "myth of Being" toward a "myth of justice."<sup>63</sup> "If the myth of Being," Caputo writes, "is tied up with National Socialist mythology, then demythologizing Heidegger is likewise an operation of denazification and of putting Heidegger's thought in the service of other, more honorable ends, ends that he himself would likely have abhorred, given his own disastrous judgment in political matters."<sup>64</sup> Caputo is looking for *another* Heidegger by disrupting Heidegger's phenomenology, based on Greco-German myth of purity, with the discourses of justice within the broader phenomenological movement.

In the following passage, Caputo offers an important insight into the potential contribution of Heidegger's more mythopoetic tones of the Fourfold for ecological thought but with the caveat that Heidegger's thinking is still too entrenched in geophilosophical myth of Being.<sup>65</sup>

The most important and salutary aspect of Heidegger's mythopoetizing of the gods is its ecological upshot. Heidegger's later writings provide a powerful neomythology of the earth, around which deep ecologists who are largely on the political left, today can draw inspiration. In this age of unrestrained violence towards a delicate ecosystem and the animal world, this age of almost unrestrained destruction of the ozone layer above and the rain forest below, Heidegger's profoundly beautiful and powerful discourses on the "thing," on letting world and earth be, on letting the rose blossom without way, could not be more urgent. The difficulty with Heidegger is that his myth of world and thing, of the Fourfold, his sacralizing of the earth is tied to a geophilosophical myth of Being's history, of

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63. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 2-3.

64. *Ibid.*, 5.

65. The "Fourfold" was "that underlying unity of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals—the 'simple oneness of the four' as Heidegger puts it in *Building Dwelling Thinking* (351) . . ." Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition), editor Edward N. Zalta, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heidegger/>, (accessed September 28, 2015).

its favorite sons and favored languages and chosen lands. At the same time it omits and even preempts the myth of justice, which is another and equiprimordial myth of the sacred earth, not a pagan myth of sacred cosmos, but a Hebraic myth of the Holy, of the call of the Other One, of the other person.<sup>66</sup>

Following Caputo's lead of remythologizing Heidegger one could work through the "ecological upshot" of Heidegger's thinking; a remythologizing toward a "myth of ecology," thus providing additional fertile ground for environmental philosophy and ethics within phenomenology.<sup>67</sup>

However, further discussion of the problematic nature of Heidegger's phenomenology and his association with Nazism, and constructive reinterpretations of his thinking for broader application toward justice and ecological thought is beyond the scope of this study. By highlighting Caputo's critique and remythologizing of Heidegger's thinking was to offer a look at Heidegger's socio-political context, and how his philosophy, although controversial, can still be relevant and reinterpreted for helping us better understand our world today. I think it would be shortsighted to cast off or negate Heidegger's contribution to hermeneutic phenomenology solely because of his Nazi past. While it certainly is an unfortunate association, we have built upon those aspects of his contribution that have stood up over time.

Besides Heidegger other philosophers and theologians were advancing a hermeneutic phenomenology in nuanced ways. Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, continued the development of hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizing that

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66. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, 183.

67. See for further discussion on ecological phenomenology: Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, *Eco-Phenomenology*.

all understanding takes place within history. And over in France, Paul Ricoeur was constructing his hermeneutic phenomenology that investigated the meaning of human experience and understanding through the interpretation of myth, symbols, language, art, and religion.<sup>68</sup>

I end this overview with van Manen's concise description of hermeneutic phenomenology found in the respective philosophies of interpretation found within Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others:

Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is a *descriptive* (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an *interpretive* (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. The implied contradiction may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) "facts" of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the "facts" of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process.<sup>69</sup>

Phenomenological research uses questions and terminology that are capacious in description. The danger of defining research terms too specifically for phenomenological investigations can lead to inadvertently introducing limitations and/or obscuring the essence of the lived experience. However, for the sake of clarity and consistency throughout this manuscript, potentially problematic terms are defined below. Some of these terms were given further attention within the literature review in chapter 2. Other

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68. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth: Christian Texas Press), 1976.

69. Van Manen, *Researching Lived-Experience*, 180-181.

less frequently used terms needing definition may appear elsewhere in the dissertation. These will be described within the text or as a footnote as appropriate.

### Definition of Terms

**Lived Experience:** The term “lived experience” describes our pre-reflective consciousness of immediate experience of phenomena that we encounter in our daily lives. In other words, our lived experiences are what happen “at the moment” free of our reflections, conceptualizations, or classifications. Phenomenological lived experiences are sought out from rich descriptive and detailed accounts.

**God, Spirit, and Divine:** There are numerous names, images, and metaphors used to refer to God in Western Christianity. The primary names used in this manuscript are “God” and “the Spirit” (or “Holy Spirit”). The Spirit and God are always capitalized and are used synonymously. When “spirit” is used in lowercase format it is a non-divine form referring to the essence of a situation, as in, “I got caught up in the spirit of the moment;” or the force of life that animates the body of living things, as in, “I locked eyes with the cat and our spirits were linked.” “Divine” is always used in lowercase format (except at the beginning of a sentence) as, within the context of this manuscript, it is less likely to be confused in meaning and is more of a descriptor of pertaining to God, as in, “a divine encounter,” or, “the divine was present with me in the woods.” Additional terms for God may include “Numinous,” “Mysterium Tremendum,” “Other,” and “the All.” It is common to assign particular attributes associated with God (e.g., omnipotent, supreme, transcendent, all powerful, or omnipresent). Phenomenologically, it is

necessary to “bracket” such characteristics of the divine as much as possible. To help with this task I sought an inquisitive and receptive approach, leaving open expressions of God to the descriptions and interpretations revealed from my participants’ in-depth interviews. In brief, terms are capitalized that are used similar to a proper name for God, and are lower case when they used as adjectives or descriptors.

**Nature or natural world:** “Nature” and “natural world” are used synonymously to refer to the “other than human” nature. While I recognize that humans are also a part of Nature, I am making this distinction for clarity and to acknowledge human tendency toward separation from Nature. The defining of Nature or the natural world is left broad to mean anything from a quintessential backcountry wilderness experience to a more mundane experience of encountering a weed growing from a crack in a sidewalk. When Nature is used it will be capitalized to refer to the natural world without excessive human construction and/or independent of human activity. When used in lowercase format, nature refers to the essential character of a thing, as in, “Must human nature always lead to dominion over Nature?”

**Christian theologian:** The seminary-educated individual who holds a doctoral degree in theology. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, they are professionals and academics currently living and contributing to the broader theological dialogue through their pedagogy and published works.

**Religious and Spiritual:** Religious experience is typically associated with the experiencing of institutionalized doctrine, liturgy, ritual, and sacraments facilitated through professional and/or lay clergy of a particular religious organization or faith-

community. Spiritual experience is frequently given expression as something outside of the formalities of religious community. Identifying oneself as “spiritual” has become a popular expression of something that is much more personal or individualistic in character outside a particular religious institution and/or faith community. Spirituality and spiritual experience can be viewed as not necessarily rooted to any particular doctrine(s) and/or basic beliefs, and often one finds that a “spiritual” person combines multiple concepts, beliefs, and practices from a number of different religions, cultures, practices, and philosophies. This discussion is extremely important in an increasingly secularized (but individually spiritual) world and the globalization and blending of religious tenants compared to the practice of a specific religion. However, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to position my study on either end of this debate. My approach is to not distinguish, but rather to leave open how the two concepts are nuanced expressions of lived experiences that help reveal understanding into the nature of the divine, human beings, and the natural world. I will use the terms synonymously. However, given that my participants are all professional theologians aligned with a specific mainline Protestant and Restoration denomination, I will primarily use “religious” unless a particular distinction was important to make in reference to the experiences of my participants.



## Research Design

### *Research Steps*

Below is a synopsis of the steps involved to prepare for and progress through my research. I then provide a discussion of how I selected research participants, gathered data, and interpreted data.

- 1) Formulated my research questions and chose research methodology.
- 2) Submitted proposal to my dissertation committee and received approval for research.
- 3) Conducted two pilot interviews to test my research questions and shape my interview approach.
- 4) Transcribed pilot interviews and fine-tuned interview approach.
- 5) Choose potential participants and contacted them. Narrowed list to final selections based on their availability and willingness to participate in the research.  
  
Scheduled interviews with each participant.
- 6) Conducted interviews by traveling to the participant's home or office and meeting in person. Interviews were documented with two digital audio recorders. See Appendix D for copy of my Interview Guide.
- 7) Transcribed interviews and began initial analysis.
- 8) Emailed each participant a verbatim transcript of their interview with an initial overarching theme interpretation.

- 9) Corrected my themes if necessary based on participant feedback.
- 10) Proceeded to create the thematic analysis and reflective writing to discover meaning.
- 11) Crafted narratives to communicate the essence of participants' religious lived experience.
- 12) Completed creation of research results manuscript fusing both analysis and narrative.

### *Selection of Research Participants*

In order to narrow my study to a specific subset, I choose to focus on five Christian theologians. Each of these theologians has been influential in my own theological development through the study of their respective theological works, classes, and collegial relationships over the years. The five Christian theologians of my study are: 1) Catherine Keller, Professor of Religion at Drew University, Madison, NJ, from the United Methodist tradition. She is a contemporary and constructivist theologian interested in the interplay of ecological and gender politics, process cosmology, poststructuralist philosophy and religious pluralism. 2) Mark I. Wallace, Professor of Religion at Swarthmore University, Swarthmore, PA, from the Presbyterian tradition. He is an ecological and constructivist theologian focusing on the intersections between Christian theology, critical theory, environmental studies, and postmodernism. 3) Darby K. Ray, former Professor of Religion at Millsap College, Millsap, Mississippi, from the Anglican tradition. She explores the interconnections of human and ecological suffering

within both a theological and economic framework. 4) Anthony (Tony) Chvala-Smith, Assistant Professor of Theology and Scripture at Community of Christ Seminary, Independence, MO, and Graceland University, Lamoni, IA, from the Community of Christ tradition. He is a biblical scholar and a historical theologian interested in how classic Western religious texts can inspire social, gender, and ecological justice. 5) Priscilla Eppinger, Professor of Religion at Community of Christ Seminary, Independence, MO, and Graceland University, Lamoni, IA, from the American Baptist tradition. She is a contemporary and historical theologian focusing on religion and ecology, environmental ethics, feminist theology, and contemporary theologies and culture.

For qualitative research the approach for the selection of participants is often described as “purposeful sampling.”<sup>70</sup> Purposeful sampling is that which “will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question.”<sup>71</sup> For most studies the researcher’s chosen qualitative research strategy will dictate the criteria they will use to purposefully select their participants. Additional criteria I considered for participant selection include: 1) my familiarity with each participant, 2) how each participant has contributed to and influenced my theological understanding and spiritual development, and 3) the participants’ availability for the study.

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70. John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003); Keith F. Punch, *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (London: Sage Publications, 1998); Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

71. Creswell, *Research Design*, 185.

Rudestam and Newton state that “most phenomenological studies engage a relatively small number of participants (10 or fewer might be appropriate).”<sup>72</sup> My study included five participants. It is important to remember that within phenomenological investigation any tendency to make broad generalizations of one’s findings is not appropriate. Thus, any attempt to make the unique lived experience of participants representative or generalizable for other individuals and/or cultural, political, or social groups is contrary to the very nature of phenomenology. However, it is also important that the phenomenological researcher’s purposeful selection takes into consideration additional elements (i.e., diversity of voices, gender balance, and culture) that are appropriate for the proposed study. My rationale for selecting of five participants included: a) Following the criteria of a phenomenological study for an appropriate number of participants; b) Being mindful of the scheduling realities of conducting interviews in person; and c) Allowing for transcribing of interviews and following-up with each participant.

### *Gathering Experiences (data collection)*

Central to any hermeneutic phenomenology is first and foremost the identification, collection, and/or construction of the text to be interpreted. “To the extent that hermeneutics is text-oriented interpretation,” wrote Ricoeur, “and inasmuch as texts are, among other things, instances of written language, no interpretation theory is possible

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72. Kjell E. Rudestam and Rae R. Newton, *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 107.

that does not come to grips with the problem of writing.”<sup>73</sup> Thus for hermeneutic phenomenology essential meaning is revealed through the construction and interpretation of texts.

The collection of data (texts)—the descriptions of Christian theologians’ religious lived experience of the natural world—was conducted through in-depth phenomenological interviews. These interviews were the source for the creation of phenomenological texts that were interpreted hermeneutically. In hermeneutic phenomenology the interview serves two very specific purposes. The first purpose is for exploring and gathering of experiential narratives/texts of lived experience. The gathered experiential texts are then the source for developing a deeper and richer understanding of a given phenomenon. Secondly, the interview serves as a way for the interviewer and participants to develop a conversational relationship to explore the meaning of an experience.<sup>74</sup>

While not all of my participants have applicable published works by or about them, I decided that reading a sampling of any available work prior to interviews would give me a foundation of knowledge and might spark some interview questions. This reading was not considered as data collection, but served only to provide this foundational context.

I conducted one in-person interview with each participant ranging in length from about 45 minutes to 90 minutes. They were digitally recorded, and used an unstructured

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73. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 25.

74. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 54-75.

interview strategy with open-ended questions. Participants described their lived-experiences in as much concrete detail as possible, adhering to the research topic, and reflected on the meaning of their experiences. Each interview was transcribed verbatim for later analysis and interpretation. Pre- and post-interview contact with participants was via e-mail or phone.

### *Interpretation of Texts and the Crafting of Narratives*

Interpretation of text within hermeneutic phenomenology soon introduces one to the concept of the “hermeneutic circle.” The hermeneutic circle expresses “the relationship between an interpreter and her or his interpretation of the text as she or he moves toward greater understanding.”<sup>75</sup> Another way of describing it is “the movement back and forth between the parts and the whole of the text” leading toward deeper understanding for the interpreter.<sup>76</sup>

Similar to the hermeneutic circle, Ricoeur described an interpretation theory for the analysis of text through a process of phases. The first phase is an initial “naïve” reading of the whole text to discover what overall message is revealed. Phase two is a process of structural analysis (focus is on the parts of the text) that then leads to a third phase of a critical or in-depth interpretation of the text (comprehension of the parts and whole together). “As phases of a unique process,” Ricoeur explained, “I propose to

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75. Valerie M. Bentz and Jeremy J. Shapiro, *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 170.

76. Bjørn Ramberg and Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (November 2005), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/> (accessed March 10, 2015).

describe this dialectic first as a move from understanding to explaining and then as a move from explanation to comprehension.”<sup>77</sup>

Guided by these three phases of interpretation, transcribed interview texts were first given an initial “naïve” reading. I read over each text several times, being open to what was being revealed to me in order to understand its meaning as a whole. For Husserl this is the process of moving from our “natural attitude” to a “phenomenological reduction.” For verification and correction of participants’ responses before conducting the more structural and critical analysis phases, I used a form of “member-checking.” This entailed providing each participant a copy of their transcribed verbatim interview with a summary of my initial “naïve” interpretations of the whole text. Participants then had opportunity to verify and correct their responses if necessary, and comment on my naïve interpretations before I advanced into the structural and critical analysis phases. Member-checking not only provided for stronger clarity, it also created greater transparency and trust-building between researcher and participants. I sent the verbatim transcribed interviews to each of my participants’ requesting their feedback and clarification for my initial analysis of their experiences. And, I respected any special requests from participants to withhold sharing any portions of our conversations they asked me not to include in my dissertation.

Following the initial naïve readings and member-checking, the next phase was to conduct a structural analysis of the texts. I chose a thematic structural analysis as described by van Manen. “ ‘Theme analysis’ refers then to the process of recovering the

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77. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 74.

theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work.”<sup>78</sup> This is done by dividing the text into meaning units that could be parts of sentences, whole sentences, multiple sentences, and/or a whole page. Basically, theme analysis looks for units of meaning throughout all parts of the text.

The emerging themes were compared with the initial understanding for validation or non-validation. In other words, were the themes I discovered throughout the text consistent with my naïve interpretations of the whole? If not, how did the themes differ and how did they modify my initial understanding?

In phase three, I brought the parts and whole back together for the final reading of the text. I was then able to articulate how each participant has experienced the Spirit in Nature and the meaning of their unique experiences.

In order to represent my data from this study, I chose a narrative format for this dissertation manuscript. Narrative proved the ideal format to represent the rich, thick descriptions captured during the study. These biographical narratives incorporate and explore thematic elements that emerged during the respective interviews and analysis.

### *Applicability of the Research*

Applicability of the research deals with whether the findings can be applied to or reflective of other people’s lived experiences. As hermeneutic phenomenology is the inquiry into the meaning of human lived experience of a particular phenomenon, we may ask if our own unique experiences of things are also the possible experiences of

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78. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 78.



others. Ricoeur explained, “the experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. . . . [And] we may say that language is itself the process by which private experience is made public.”<sup>79</sup> So the applicability of the research is not about proving a nominal expression and understanding that people have the *same* lived experiences. Rather, the making public of our private lived experiences through recalling them to where the essential aspects are revealed helps us recognize them as possible experiences or interpretation of an experience contributing to lived meaning, thus making private lived experiences “public.”

### *My Role as Researcher and Ethical Considerations*

Because of the interpretative nature of qualitative research a necessary task of the researcher is the identification of their personal biases, values, understandings, assumptions, experiences, and interests regarding their research.<sup>80</sup> The reflections I brought to this study of lived experience of encountering the divine in the natural world has been shaped by my personal experiences. My life experiences have culminated along a twofold path which has led me to this research.

One path has been that of a student of theology where I have received theological training through formal education and self-study where I have focused predominantly in ecotheology. In 2001, I became an ordained minister for my denomination, Community of Christ, and have served both as a lay minister and professional clergy for the church.

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79. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 16, 19.

80. Creswell, *Research Design*, 184.

For the past few years I have served on the church's Theology Formation Team. As a Christian minister my passion is bringing others and myself closer to God.

The other path has been that of an environmental educator where I have had abundant opportunities to teach environmental ethics, ecology, and natural history for children and adults. Spending time outside, hiking through the woods, working gardens, camping and backpacking, birding, and practicing my skills as a natural historian is essential to my being. As an environmental educator my passion is bringing others and myself closer to the natural world.

Throughout my adult life I have spent a great deal of time exploring the connections of theology and ecology. I am continually seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being in relationship with the divine and the natural world. From this twofold path I have brought a wealth of spiritual, theological, and ecological experience to this inquiry of what it is like to experience the divine in Nature.

It is also due to my prior knowledge that I brought certain biases, values, and pre-understanding to this study. Ecotheology may be my departure point, but this study is neither a theological treatise nor advocating for any particular doctrinal belief. This is a hermeneutic phenomenological study and I am in the role of a phenomenological researcher not a theologian.

However, I realize that my pre-understandings and beliefs surely influenced my perceptions and interpretations of the findings. I named the following pre-understandings prior to beginning this study: a) God's Spirit is the power of life that creates, renews, and transforms all of Creation; b) today's ecological crisis is at the same time a spiritual crisis

resulting from humanity's failure to acknowledge the sacredness of life; c) Christian religious experience of the divine is diverse, a perceptual activity, and difficult to articulate; d) Christian religious experience requires belief, imagination, intentionality, and discernment; e) it is subjective and thus should be interpreted in relationship to the other predominant methodologies of theological reflection—Scripture, Tradition, and Reason; and f) I believe in an immanent transcendence or in other words, God in all things and all things in God.

Because of my biases, named and unnamed, I made every effort to be attentive to and explicit about my assumptions and understandings by adhering to the “hermeneutic reduction” process. The hermeneutic reduction is a process where the researcher engages in reflection and continual setting aside of pre-understandings, biases, beliefs, and experiences while interpreting text.

Such a process is similar to Husserl's “phenomenological reduction.” The difference between these two “reductions” is that the former is a process of continual bracketing one's pre-understandings throughout the interpretation of text, where the latter tries to bracket all pre-understandings from the beginning and does not incorporate interpretational methods. These differences may be nuanced, but the importance is to avoid projecting my meaning by allowing the meaning to reveal itself to me.

Another crucial aspect of the researcher's role in qualitative research is the discussion of ethical considerations inherent in any social science study. Punch describes two main types of ethical issues: 1) professional codes of conduct for research, and 2) the ethical issues that may arise in the different qualitative approaches. Similarly, Rudestam

and Newton discuss that “fully informed consent to participate” and the need for participants “to emerge from the experience unharmed” are the two most important ethical issues. The researcher has a paramount responsibility to respect and protect the rights, values, needs, and desires of the participants. Due to the nature of intensive and lengthy interviews and observations in phenomenological research, it can be an obtrusive experience in the lives of participants. In addition, sensitive and/or revealing information may be shared.<sup>81</sup>

To respect and protect the welfare of my participants I adhered to Antioch University New England (AUNE) Human Research Committee’s code of ethical conduct, standards, and policies. Prior to initiating my study I submitted an *Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Participants* with all required documentation to the AUNE Human Research Committee (Appendix B). I clearly communicated all research objectives, procedures, means of data collection and use, etc. to my participants to reduce the chances of misunderstanding. Participants completed an *Informed Consent Form* to confirm their agreement to participate in the study (Appendix C).

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81. Creswell, *Research Design*; Lawrence F. Locke, Waneen W. Spirduso, and Stephen J. Silverman, *Proposals that Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007); Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994); Punch, *Introduction to Social Research*; Rudestam and Newton, *Surviving Your Dissertation*, 276; van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*.

## Chapter 4

### Religious Lived Experiences of Five Christian Theologians

When Spirit gets grounded, we may then circulate our life love as a groundswell, rather than as a transcendental updraft.

—Sharon Betcher, “Grounding the Spirit,” *Ecospirit*

#### Introduction

Theologian Sharon Betcher’s poetic rooting of the Spirit in the Earth, reflects my participants’ shared conception of the divine as ever-present in and through all of Nature. Spirit is already grounded; is already present in all life at every moment. It is we who all too often fail to recognize God’s immanent presence in the here and now. Our gaze tries to follow an amorphous “transcendental updraft,” seeking the intangible cosmos instead of the tangible earth. When we are looking up, metaphorically, we don’t see the ground. To metaphorically “look to the ground” can be understood through theologian Douglas Christie’s description of “spirituality not as something separate and distinct from ordinary experience but as a fully embodied and encompassing dimension of life itself.”<sup>82</sup>

Without exception, my participants not only look to the ground to find God, they dig in deep with their whole selves. I discovered in their religious lived experiences in and through Nature a groundswell of richness and beauty. They have encountered the divine grounded in the particularities of place, species, and weather. For example,

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82. Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii.

Catherine Keller was nurtured by the aesthetics of autumn maples and comforted by clumps of grass in her expression of God's Spirit as the relation of the relation. Mark Wallace glimpsed the incarnation of God's Spirit in avian life-forms and their thriving. Darby Ray tumbled with the Spirit in the ocean and the storm. Tony found it in wind and geese and forest. And, Priscilla encountered God rooted in the gardens of her life, and in the mutual blessings of her relationship with her cats.

In this chapter I present the results of my research. There is one section for each participant which offers a brief introduction of the person, followed by a synopsis of their lived experiences in the form of a thematic analysis. At the end of each section I reflect on the significant and sometimes surprising revelations of each interview. The last section summarizes the chapter.

## **Catherine Keller**

### Introduction

Catherine Keller is Professor of Religion at Drew University, Madison, NJ, and is from the United Methodist tradition. In 1984, she received her doctorate in the Philosophy of Religion and Theology from Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California. She has been a member of the Constructive Theology Workgroup since 1988. She is a contemporary and constructivist theologian interested in the interplay of ecological and gender politics, process cosmology, poststructuralist philosophy and religious pluralism. We spoke at her apartment in Manhattan, New York.

## Thematic Analysis

The three significant themes I have identified from Catherine's text are: 1) *Comfort and Restoration*, 2) *Opening and Emptying*, and 3) *Enfolding Relation*. The major points of contact in Catherine's adult life that best express how she experiences the Spirit in and through Nature include the Drew University campus and the landscape surrounding the cabin in the Catskills she owns with her spouse. She also shared powerful childhood and young adult experiences that emerged out of traumatic times in her life.

Underlying these themes is her conception of God as relation that is in and through all of life. To Catherine, God is not a separation that is "over and against." To even call it God, she said, is "always for me a step removed," for our metaphors and language of God and our attempts to know or explain God always fall short. She often refers to God as the "All," reflecting her broad cosmological scope. As a theologian she doesn't have much "innocence" about God and, yet, still there is mystery and wonder that reflects an openness on her part to seek understanding about this thing we call God. Nonhuman Nature plays a key role in reflecting these concepts of God back to her, reinforcing her openness to experience the Spirit in and through minimalized human constructed natural places.

Catherine is a big picture thinker and writer, pursuing a sense of the whole. She is highly critical of all forms of dualistic thinking. During our interview, she was quick to analyze the assumptions beneath the terms we use, and how those assumptions can contribute to separation instead of interconnection. God, Nature, and Spirit were all

terms she had to first explore the nuances of before she could delve into accounts of her lived experience. Out of respect for Catherine's unpacking of the word Nature, I will use "nonhuman" in conjunction with Nature to emphasize that portion of Nature which is other than human.

### *Comfort and Restoration*

Being in relationship with nonhuman Nature comforts and restores Catherine. Comfort is about being soothed and releasing negative thoughts and feelings. Restoration is about being nourished and gaining positive thoughts and feelings. Nature comforted her as a child, and it has been a healing balm for the childhood scars carried into adulthood. It is the place she turns to recharge her senses and be reminded of what it means to be human. Catherine responds to this restoration of being with a deep sense of gratitude.

She shared of a painful childhood with excessive family trauma that left her bereft of a sense of place that is an important childhood experience for many. Intimately bonding to people, place, and creatures was not available to her because her family moved often. However, she did recall turning to the earth for solace on one particularly difficult day. Her experience of that day is presented below as a narrative:

Catherine was just old enough to begin to see the pattern. A year, maybe two, they'd be gone again. No close-by family, no friends, no familiar neighborhood, just one move after the next. She was also old enough to have absorbed a good deal of her mother's distress and disappointment and anger. It was too much for a young girl. Some days, it was all just too much.

Now they were yelling. It's what she hated most – their yelling. It tore her up inside. She had to get away from it, she had to get out. Bursting through the



back door, she ran from the house. She didn't even know where she was going. It didn't matter. She ran, raging. She ran until she flung herself face down into the grass. She fought against the pain and anger, kicking and crying.

Her fingers grabbed the green blades and something released deep inside her. It was like being enfolded in a loving embrace. She breathed in the deep green scent of damp earth and bruised grass. As her spirit fed upon this moment, her body let go the tension and relaxed as she breathed in and out, in and out.

Catherine also remembers, in college, turning again to comforting clumps of grass on a day when she was in the midst of an academic crisis. In need of catharsis and reeling in the drama of her angst she threw herself in a tearful fit face down on the campus green, once again experiencing the restorative power of the earth for her spirit. Of these experiences she said, "maybe that's something I've had that has allowed me to come out rather wholesomely. . . . didn't have other people because there weren't any; there was just our nuclear family. But, there were clumps of grass."

The typical grassy lawn is perhaps one of the least biologically rich ecosystems on the planet and yet it held what she needed at particular moments. Aesthetics and beauty are very important to her, and yet the monotony of grass was enough in her in those times of need. So for the young Catherine, nonhuman Nature did not necessarily have to be aesthetically or ecologically rich, nor did a particular sense of place need to accompany the experience in order for Nature to provide a place for release and comfort. Even though early in her life Catherine did not have the theological language she has now to describe her lived experience, these moments of comfort stayed with her and would underlie her future conception of the Spirit in and through all things, even a weedy patch of grass.

She does not consider the challenges of her childhood completely without merit in relating to the world, believing it has given her understanding of others lacking a sense of place due to today's highly mobile and migrant society: "I've always felt that my very nomadic and traumatic childhood is relevant to the ecological movement because a lot more people are like that now."

Entering adulthood with brokenness from a difficult childhood left her in need of restoration. And, as an adult, she came to an understanding of the bondedness to place that was missing in her early life. She was able to find restoration in part through cultivating a deep relationship with nonhuman Nature and thereby deepening her relationship with the Spirit in and through Nature. As an adult, "I'm fairly healthy, and that has something to do with nonhuman Nature, of course."

When I interviewed Catherine it was November and she described how beautiful Drew University campus oak forest is to her each autumn. She commutes by train from Manhattan, New York, to the Drew University campus in Madison, New Jersey, an hour and a half each way. During the fall she feels entranced by the intense colors of autumn foliage as she arrives on campus and walks among the trees. Sometimes she might run her hand across a tree's gray furrowed bark on her meditative circles. Other times she might sit with her back pressed against a trunk, reading, preparing class notes, or just breathing:

[Drew University is] just a beautiful little suburban campus with a kind of suburban oak forest. And, I walk up the hill from the train and I feed myself. This time of the year, of course, it's overwhelming! Just nurturing myself on those sugar maples that go through their splendid fanfare of colors, and they go on and on for weeks. So, that's very much part of feeding the being. . . . On campus there

are certain sugar maples that are right there for me to walk out and around. I mean, that part of life is very rich, and I've been lucky to have that.

To further describe her sense of the restorative power of nonhuman Nature in her life, she shared her ritual of walking around the double glacier pond in the arboretum near campus. This oak forest sprawls from the train station and then across the 186 acres of the Drew campus with the nickname "the University of the Forest." The double pond was scooped out during the last ice age by glaciation, and the Drew family lined it with clay to hold water about 200 years ago:

I walk figure-eight around the two of them. Yeah, it's beautiful because the arboretum is kept precious. There are too many deer now—those dear deers—I know what it means that there are too many. [Laughs] What does it do for me? This is about restoration, and opening of spirit. It's not that I look out there and I see The Spirit, but I just feel spirited from it, right? I mean one thing is that it's aesthetic—I'm very visual. At another level I'm just very aware of being fortunate to be in occasional, regular circumstances with a minimum of human structuring, because it allows me to remember what it is to be human. We desperately need the nonhuman to talk to us about our humanness.

This passage expresses the sense of restoration Catherine experiences and the gratitude she feels to be able to on a regular basis walk around the ponds. Her sense of restoration comes from her experience of this particular time and place with the minimal of human cultural constructs. Her walking ritual recharges her senses. It is not an intellectual process, "not a dramatic experience, it's just very restorative."

Also significant is that nonhuman Nature is not just something to be observed for its beauty, there is relationship, there is a dialogue going on. She learns about her own humanness from the nonhuman world. This relationship restores her to herself.

## *Opening and Emptying*

Nature has an opening and emptying effect on Catherine. Opening is being able to move beyond times of feeling too inwardly focused, closed up, stagnant, stuck, and overwhelmed. Emptying happens naturally when she reaches the point of being open within herself. She refers to these moments of release using the Greek word “kenosis” (which means emptying). While she now regularly visits special natural places with intention, the experience of opening cannot be forced or contrived. But there are moments when an experience congeals as she bonds with place and her closed up inner space opens wide allowing her to empty her inner chaos and find stillness and peace. She uses the language of folds to describe what happens during these moments: folding, unfolding, enfolding.

Catherine loves teaching and finds it a very natural process, but it is to writing that she feels most distinctly called. And, it is writing that is prone to stymie her. At one time she could write freely in Manhattan, but increasingly over the past several years, she needs to be surrounded by nonhuman Nature to help her open and empty. She and her spouse, Jason, own a cabin in the Catskills. This has become her sanctuary away from the city; the place she now goes to write. The following experience of this special place is presented in narrative format:

Catherine had been away from working on her most recent book due to other pressing demands. She was anxious to get back to writing, and she had a block of weeks set aside to work at the cabin. The rush to tie up loose ends so she could be away, combined with the pressure of writing resulted in being completely stressed out and overwhelmed when she arrived at the cabin.

This wasn't a retreat or a vacation—she was here to work. But, she couldn't just sit down at the computer and start writing. It wasn't going to happen.

The keyboard held no magic button to induce her quickly into theological reflections and writing. Her mind was blank, and not in a good sort of Zen emptying way. The clock was ticking, but nothing would come.

She grabbed a full water bottle, opened the cabin door, and started down a trail. Minutes later, she arrived at a gurgling brook that cut a picturesque little chasm through the sort of Catskill mountainscape that inspired the American landscape painters of the Hudson River School. The stream was charged from recent rains and its sound was inviting to her. This was what she needed right now.

On a large rock in the stream, but just far enough out of the water to be a dry perch, she piled up some rocks as a back support and sat. She began to breathe without trying to breathe. As her breathing rhythm established itself, the door to her spirit creaked open. She breathed herself out. She began to self-empty, to unfold. The place enfolded itself in and through her. She breathed the marvelously mixed arboreal milieu and the light that played in each cell of dragonfly wings. In the fluid canvas of a still eddy, water skimmers composed expanding circles of reflected sky. A tiny trout swam by.

She breathed. She shared breath with the brook, the rocks, the woods. She sat for hours. There was no mental dilemma, no effort to contrive anything, no theological maneuvering or forced encounter. She just sat and breathed. The all of her and the all of this beloved place that had bonded itself within her in a way she never knew as a child folded outward even further, until the hugeness of the cosmological reality folded back inwards and the All was one, together, related, relation, nameless, infinite, unknowable and yet deeply known.

After this experience of being enfolded by that “very beloved and now very known” place she felt emptied of all that was holding her back and was finally able to open herself up to the writing process. She again expressed gratitude for the privilege of going to the Catskills, and for her spouse, Jason, who helps her to continue cultivating and deepening her relationship with nonhuman Nature.

### *Enfolding Relation*

Understanding how Catherine perceives God is important to placing where the divine resides in her experiences of nonhuman Nature. Because she is a broad

cosmological thinker, finding God in the down to earth minutia of her experiences of the nonhuman could feel challenging. One might be quick to claim her experience as purely aesthetic, a warm fuzzy reaction to beauty. But digging deeper into her cosmology and her use of language, it is apparent that just because she resists defining God in conventional theological terminology or just because she lays no claim to God as an otherworldly entity, does not mean that what we can call God is not very present for her in natural places. Her resistance is to the shortcomings of human language to describe God, and to the human tendency to limit God or separate God from everything else.

Her conception of the Spirit is as clear as her beloved Catskills brook, “God is relation.” She has experiences with Nature that might not be in her words dramatic or mystical, but they are immediate and intimate and the divine is there. Of these experiences she said, “God is the relationship to that moment. I understand that because God is all about relationship. . . . For me, God is really that Spirit which is the relation of the relation . . . I have the sense of the whole, the whole shebang being the unfolding of what we can call God. And I can relate to it All, capital ‘A,’ in and through what we can call God.” God is the “All-encompassing,” all connecting and eternal unfolding of the mysterious and infinite. This perspective illuminates that God was present for Catherine in clumps of grass, and campus trees and ponds, and in the Catskills.

Nonhuman Nature also plays a mentor-like role for Catherine in her spiritual practices, helping her enfold with “the relation of the relation”. As we saw above in the *Opening and Emptying* thematic analysis, meditative breathing is an important spiritual practice for Catherine. She described her breathing meditation as a prayer. She breathes

with the earth and the breath of life, acknowledging the All. Breathing in, “You and me,” breathing out, “Me and you.” She is aware of the air moving through the folds of her lungs. She is aware of waves of enfolding, moving like water through the hydrosphere, “the water out of the earth, the earth out of the water, the atmosphere that also needs to breathe.” The waves ripple out and back, enfolding her back in. The ‘You’ in her prayer she said, “certainly is God.”

However Catherine is aware of a potential pitfall in this prayer of breathing. She sees a danger in letting it become rote and so she deliberately uses it sparingly lest she force a particular or narrow conceptualization of God. Her safest pathway to the All seems to be her kenotic exercise, self-emptying without agenda, without goal, without striving or projecting her conceptualizations or verbalizations onto it. In this way the All can emerge constantly in new ways, without constraint. And she can discover new ways of emptying and opening to interrelationship with Nature and the All.

Catherine’s experiences of enfolding with the infinite lead to a “cosmology of folds,” that continues to reveal itself through her journey with language, with her students, with nonhuman Nature, and with all parts of the whole. God is relation, the most intimate and vital relation to life. God is the shared air we breathe in and out with the rest of Creation. But all is not well within the cosmic breath. The climate crisis, Catherine describes as our “turning folds into tears, rips, cuts” of the cosmological fabric of the whole.

Catherine expressed a sense of the whole of life with all its interconnections. Her thoughtful sharing with me was ripe with imagination, perception, process orientation,

and systems thinking, like the view of Earth from outer space—the view of the encompassing atmosphere that surrounds and flows in and through. The “All” of life (the big picture of God as relation between and through all things and processes) cannot really be put into words, quantified, or qualified, because, as Catherine expressed it, it is “constantly splashing up in new forms—like us now at this moment.”

### Reflections

What I found most significant about Catherine’s experiences is the contrast between her early childhood and young adult experiences, and her experiences later in her adult life. Her early experiences were ones of distressful emotional experience where she turned to nonhuman Nature for comfort. The later adult experiences she shared were more intentionally sought out encounters of opening, emptying, and renewal.

Catherine’s childhood memories and experiences could be interpreted as the beginning of her enfolding with God in Nature that would later help her mature into a much more open and emotionally healthy person in spite of the “violence of the background” of her growing up. Later in life her encounters with nonhuman Nature are not as desperate and emotionally charged – with adulthood comes maturity and intentionality, learning what is needed to navigate challenging times of life. I think it is a significant testament to the power of nonhuman Nature in Catherine’s life that she credits this relationship with her emotional health as a successful adult who actively seeks out times of being in special natural places.



What surprised me the most about my conversation with Catherine is that, in her opinion, she did not have foundational childhood bonding experiences with nonhuman Nature. When we spoke before the interview, she expressed her doubts about being a good candidate for my research because she didn't have the kinds of experiences she thought I was looking for. She again stated this feeling at the beginning of the interview. And yet, once she began to share, her powerful "clumps of grass" story emerged. The energy in the room as she shared was tremendous as she conveyed the emotional power and healing release of this experience.

Collectively, Catherine's sharing points toward nonhuman Nature as mediating or amplifying not only divinity but also her own humanity. Relationship with Nature comforts and heals, and helps her move beyond barriers. God is the relation that enfolds all including nonhuman Nature and human.

## **Mark I. Wallace**

### Introduction

Mark I. Wallace is Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, and is from the Presbyterian tradition. Mark received his doctorate in religion from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1986. He is a member of the Constructive Theology Workgroup. He focuses on the intersections between Christian theology, critical theory, environmental studies, and postmodernism. In his writing, he seeks to answer questions that are at the same time religious, moral, and ecological. We spoke at his office at Swarthmore College.

## Thematic Analysis

The three significant themes I have identified from Mark's text are: 1) *Seeking and Being Encountered*, 2) *Awe and Surprise*, and 3) *Hope*. Mark shared voluminous experiences of the Spirit in Nature; therefore, I have elected to focus only on his most significant point of contact: God's presence as expressed through birds. Birds hold for Mark the significance of being a biblically rooted and tangible expression of the Spirit.

Underlying these themes is his conception of God as the force of life, incarnate throughout all of Nature. "God is always already everywhere." Mark eagerly seeks out God in avian form, both theologically and personally: "To me one can't be authentically Christian and be biblically rooted unless one sees God as enfleshing God's self not only in human but also in animal form . . . and in particular through the bird God." He is also influenced by his Cherokee heritage, and is interested in Native American spirituality.

### *Seeking and Being Encountered*

Mark seeks out the Spirit in Nature with intention. He enters natural places with expectation, an eagerness to experience a response from God there. At such times, he is both encountering God and being encountered by God. These encounters are relational and sacramental, and give him a sense of being cared for.

For Mark, the centrality of incarnation is of utmost importance to Christianity: God in the flesh—an earthy God, a sensual God. "I think of religion as an exercise in sensuality. I used to not think that way when I was a younger man; I thought religion was more of a head thing. Now I think of it as a heart and a body thing. It engages the

brain, but unless spirituality engages the heart and the body, then something is really missing.” This belief explains the importance to Mark not only of seeing God as embodied in and through Nature, but also of experiencing the Spirit in Nature through his own bodily-sensory experience. When he shared with me about his encounters, he described them as, “a very rich, sensual experience” – the sun on his face, the wind in his hair, laying on stone, sitting on earth, hearing bird calls, seeing a raptor spectacle, wading in water, feeling connected, feeling Spirit.

Experience and understanding of God, Mark explained, can be deepened by, “attending to how God presents Godself in the biblical witness in nonhuman life forms.” He believes that the evidence of God as bird has been too often ignored by Christianity despite a strong avian presence in the biblical text:

This goes back to Genesis with the Spirit hovering over the face of the deep which is birdy imagery. And it’s also the clear presentation of the Spirit bird, the avian God, what Catherine Keller calls the God of flesh and feathers. A clear presentation of this avian God in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism where, actually in all four Gospels, the Spirit presents itself in the form of a dove.

To illustrate his personal perception of God as bird, he shared an experience that took place during a six-month research sabbatical in Costa Rica at the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. The local Quaker community was instrumental in the area becoming a protected forest, and this is the reason Mark wanted to visit there. “I wanted to study and live in a place where spiritually motivated individuals, in this case Christians, Quakers, would go into a place and, as it were, save it and make it a sort of model for an integrated existence between humans and the more-than-human world, but from an explicitly

religious and moral perspective.” Here, I retell a portion of his experience in narrative form:

A day alone. Mark was wandering deep into the cloud forest feeling like he was hiking through a Gauguin painting. From some hidden perch high in the canopy, a Montezuma oropendola announced itself with a bizarre litany of wheezy squeaks, gurgles, and pops. Perhaps it was displaying for a potential mate with characteristic drama involving a forward half somersault around its perch while trumpeting the mechanistic-sounding trill.

Further in and now completely surrounded in thick jungle, Mark settled in to ‘be.’ The trees were festooned with bromeliads and orchids which thrived in the misty liquid air. He could be in that place until the moss covered him over and planted him with ferns. But, what was that? Something was coming.

Something was crashing through the underbrush, snapping twigs. Was it a Jaguar? Baird’s Tapir? Unlikely. In the unprotected days of this forest, the keystone predators had been hunted nearly to extinction; therefore, they were so few in number that an encounter was improbable. Still, this crashing around was a bit disquieting, as it echoed through the lush tropical vegetation.

Suddenly, there it was. It was God! God had red eyes and legs, blue beak, and soft black feathers: God was enfleshed as a *pava negra*, a black turkey.

Mark communed with the *pava negra* off and on for days after his initial encounter. He learned the sounds of their moving through the woods. He acquainted himself with their generally quiet nature, when not crashing through underbrush, noted by very limited flight and an almost complete lack of vocalizations. Nonetheless, even without a voice they called to him, they called to his spirit, and being with these unafraid and gentle birds touched him in enduring and transformative ways. “I felt God’s presence. When natural beings—birds, plants, animals, insects, reptiles—are allowed to birth and tend to their young, survive and flourish in a healthy habitat, that is a very rare and precious dynamic.” It was intimate. He expressed that in their presence he felt loved and tended to. He felt optimistic and encouraged.

As Mark described and reflected on his experience with the *pava negra*, I noticed an initial sense of uncertainty, curiosity, fear, and startlement. This gave way to experiencing the spectacle of beauty and being in the moment with another creature. Finally, rather than ending as a purely aesthetic experience, it became a communing with the divine in that creature. Mark felt the Spirit through the *pava negra*. This pivotal encounter will be revisited in the Awe and Surprise, and the Hope thematic analysis subsections.

Another aspect of his time in Costa Rica was the opportunity to attend worship with his family at the open-air wood framed Quaker meeting house located in the higher elevations of Monteverde. It was particularly special for Mark because it was a rare coming together of formal worship and a natural setting. The services there were characterized by Quaker practices of long stretches where no one spoke, rather, those in attendance sat together in silence. In this quiet space, the birds sang from the surrounding forest. Here is how Mark described the experience:

As you sit in silence you might catch a glimpse of resplendent quetzal, which is this incredible . . . probably the most beautiful bird I think in Central and South America. Sort of like peacock but different. Its beautiful reds and greens. Or the bellbird, which has this huge wattle, isn't as spectacular visually as the quetzal but has this spectacular call -- It sounds like a bell. So, as you're sitting in the meeting house and you catch a glimpse of a toucan with its multicolored rainbow beak, or the quetzal, or you hear the bellbird -- it's the marriage of heaven and earth. It's Milton's dream. And you're actually living the dream in the moment.

Experiences of encounter such as these, and the Hawk Mountain experience detailed in the *Hope* section below, are sacramental to Mark. Again, the encounters are more than purely aesthetic in nature; there is this other dimension that involves being

with and participating with God. It is not to him a vague notion of divinity; it is a very real, down to earth, reciprocal being with God. As he reflected on his experiences, Mark used religious language:

It's communion. When I eat, symbolically, the flesh and drink the blood of God in the Eucharist. My Catholic friends refer to that as Eucharist, and my Protestant friends refer to it as Communion. I like the language Communion. Eucharist is the Greek word for thanksgiving . . . but I like the Latin term Communion, because it's a co-mingling, it's an intimacy, it's a relationship -- it's something magical. And, that's what I feel. Like I did with the *pava negra*, I feel cared for, I feel connected.

### *Awe and Surprise*

Mark's experiences are imbued with a sense of deep reverence. Often this awe is wrapped up with an element of surprise which he describes as arresting or startling or jarring. These experiences can come during special trips to faraway places, but they are perhaps even more likely to emerge as unexpected spectacles embedded in everyday life.

Mark said that Crum Woods, part of Swarthmore College campus, is "a place of refuge and solace and, for myself, a kind of private interior theater for Nature-based spiritual exercises . . . a place where I find God, I find Spirit through the rhythms of natural life." He sits and walks and runs in the woods. He sings and meditates and prays and reads in the woods. Mark also regularly teaches classes in the woods, an increasingly important component of his pedagogy. He incorporates conventional learning (i.e., books, papers, etc.) with being in this natural setting. This approach helps make the learning more concrete, grounded in a real place. Thus, these woods are a vibrant and necessary part of his life, personally and professionally.

Crum Woods is a 220-acre forest oasis in the otherwise highly developed greater Philadelphia urban area. It is watched over by the Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College. The Crum comprises almost three-fifths of the College's land holdings. These woods are integrated into at least thirty-five academic courses, and provide a natural setting with miles of hiking trails for the surrounding community. Despite heavy visitation, it is still a place that one can find solitude and a touch of the wild.

The following narrative presents a transcendent encounter which happened quite publicly during one of Mark's outdoor classes in the woods:

Having a Council of All Beings with college students was always a leap of faith that required Mark to let go of the professorial need to control the class. He still remembers the first time like it was yesterday, but it was over a decade ago. Sitting there in a circle with his students on the grass of an open meadow within Crum Woods, surrounded by a circle of stones appropriately named "Crumhenge," he waited.

The students were supposed to feel "called upon" to speak in the first person as a particular nonhuman life form: a clod of dirt, a redwing blackbird, a monarch butterfly. This imaginative shape-shifting exercise was intended to help students establish an identity as a biological being and create empathy with other-than-human beings. He waited.

He could practically read their minds. They don't want to do this – it's stupid; it's embarrassing. They felt disoriented, uncomfortable. He kept waiting. A half hour went by, and still no one spoke. He was sweating profusely. Anxiety raced through him. He thought, "This is an insanely stupid idea! Why did I ever think we could go into the woods and become a red-backed salamander?" Then it happened; one person spoke. It was a dam breaking, a release of tension. Suddenly everyone felt liberated to speak. It worked!

Over the years he had learned to trust the process, to wait patiently without concern, knowing that someone would speak. And so now, here he was again, circled up with students in Crumhenge. Things were going well. Someone was speaking as great blue heron, "I live in these woods, but habitat has been degraded by development pressures on the margins. Please save my habitat and permit me to continue to live and to survive and to flourish." As the student finished speaking, the group gave the customary collective response, "We hear you Great Blue Heron." At that very moment an extraordinary thing happened – a real great

blue heron flew overhead. The bird came right through Crumhenge and then landed in the creek below.

Now Mark had very carefully crafted the reading and preparation leading up to this ritual. There was a logical progression to his class and he was rigid about it. The pedagogical innovation of the ritual was powerful, but needed to be anchored between the preparation of the readings and, lastly, the integrating process-discussion about the readings and the ritual. Native American shamans and their shape shifting tradition; check. *Historic Roots for Ecologic Crisis* by Lynn White, Jr.; check. Martin Heidegger's work on technology; check. Ritual; almost check. Intense intellectual post-ritual discussion; sigh. A weighing of the scales ensued in his mind, "You know, Heidegger...or the great blue heron?" He announced to the class, "Let's go track the heron."

Mark and his students spent the rest of their afternoon together with the heron.

They let go their books and notes and wandered into the creek, pants rolled up, some taking off their shoes. They gently observed this huge and majestic bird with its quiet presence and peculiar gait. The heron led them like a sentinel, like a guardian of the woods, announcing everything that was about to happen.

Mark and his fellow biological beings reaped the rewards of letting go his agenda and living into the surprise gifts of the moment. Together, they experienced the uplift that comes of an innocent openness of spirit and immersion with sacred earth. Rigidity would have closed them to a deepening of their experience in the woods, and would have denied them the sense of awe that came overflowing from directly encountering the bird God messenger.

"I'm always looking for rumors or flickers or flashes of God as an avian life form in my everyday goings about." Seeking with such intention and expectation surely serves as an invitation of response from the Spirit in Nature. Being present in this relational



way, both encountering and being encountered, opens Mark to a transformative sense of awe.

His seeking does not negate the opportunity for surprise in an anticlimactic way, but rather helps him pay attention to the potential of meeting God in feathered form. Being available to God propelled his experiencing the awe of great blue heron and the *pava negra* discussed in the *Seeking and Being Encountered* section above. It is the surprise aspect that emerged as an important component of getting Mark's attention in an awe-inspiring way. "The *pava negra* in particular was such an arresting experience. . . . It was the visual registry of my eyes. It was the visual encounter that was so startling. What did I feel? I felt . . . loved. I felt called. I felt a very special kind of intimacy with this bird. I felt God's presence."

### *Hope*

Mark depends on experiencing the Spirit in Nature to renew his sense of hope in the face of environmental degradation and climate change warnings. Without regular encounters that help keep him hopeful, he is prone to feeling pessimistic about the future. Healthy places resonate with God's presence, while places that are badly degraded can obscure the Spirit. Being in places of restored habitat has been particularly encouraging for him.

"All creation is charged with sacred presence, but particular places concentrate that presence in ways that I find enormously uplifting and satisfying." Mark seeks hope in Nature because so much of human relationship with the rest of the natural world has

been one of human dominance over and violence toward. So, to experience moments and places where humans are participating in the healing of other is a counter balance to the more negative aspects of human-Nature relationship. Mark seeks out the positive aspects because it offers him an example of how humans can live with, not against, the rest of Nature.

The *pava negra* experience, again, proving itself as a multi-layered and pivotal moment, was one such encounter of hope. Before the area had been set aside for preservation, the *pava negra* had almost been hunted out as a food source. At the time of his encounter, the bird's population had rebounded to a healthier level. Having a spiritually uplifting moment in a place that was thriving again after once being quite negatively impacted by human actions was restorative to him:

I felt tended to because the dire warnings about what we're doing to the planet are so soul-crushing sometimes, that unless I have these optimistic moments and encounters with spectacular life forms able to grow and nurture their young and enjoy the life cycle in peace and harmony with other life forms – unless I have experiences like that I just get crushed and depressed about the future of the planet. So the *pava negra* and its return, its thriving, robust, rambunctious, comical presence in the woods gives me enormous hope for the future.”

Human attitudes toward Monteverde shifted toward a greater respect for life, allowing it to flourish and renew. If all life is incarnated with God's Spirit, then our relationships with each other and the land should reflect respect and reverence. The success in Monteverde was a microcosm of that expression for Mark and it gave him renewed hope to have experienced it.

Much closer to home for Mark is Hawk Mountain, a special hope-filled place that he visits regularly. It is located in the Northern Appalachians on the Kittatinny Ridge,

about two hours from Philadelphia. In the fall, the weather patterns and geography of the area funnel migrating raptors through this narrow band of ridgeline. They fly low over the ridge and in great numbers, “so close that you can almost reach out and touch them.” It is a protected place where raptor migration is closely studied by scientists and regularly witnessed by bird enthusiasts. But it has not always been this way – “This used to be an avian killing field. Hunters would stand on the ridge at Hawk Mountain and take down dozens of birds every day just for blood sport. The place was saved about 60 years ago.” Here, in his own words, Mark tells what it is like for him to experience this place:

It’s definitely self-sustaining to go to Hawk Mountain and be buoyed by the optimistic tableau of these spectacular birds flying overhead. . . . I lie down on the rocks, and it’s a very—there can be dozens of people there on a day like this, but it’s a very hushed environment. It’s more quiet than a church; or maybe it is a church of a certain sort. People come from all over the country, from all walks of life, and a hush falls over the collection of birders, professionals and amateurs. People like me with a \$20 pair of binoculars and people with very sophisticated equipment.

As one of these spectacular raptors comes up over the ridge, somebody will say, “Bald eagle at 2 o’clock,” but in a very kind of hushed tone, like, “For our next hymn we will sing, *Oh Sacred Head Thou Wounded*.” [Laughter] It’s in a very hushed reverent tone. And then in rapt, completely focused attention, we watch . . . If God bodied forth God’s self in human form and God bodied forth God’s self in avian form . . . and if the Spirit continues to be with us, as is the promise of Christian faith, then I think the Spirit is present in these spectacular birds of prey.

Part of the lure of this place for Mark is that the raptor viewing area, called the North Lookout, is left natural, not developed into a commercialized tourist trap. There is a visitor’s center located separately in a wooded area. “But, once you get up onto the ridge . . . you’re overlooking the Kittatinny Ridge, and there’s nothing there but you and

the sky and these people with you – in this sacred [place]. It's a church; it's a sacred theater – and [there's] the birds as they come up over the ridge.”

Hawk Mountain and Monteverde are both places that have been allowed by people to heal from past abuses. Mark believes that the Spirit is able to be more fully present in natural places that are unspoiled or that have been given the opportunity to heal:

I think God is that extraordinary, invigorating, pulsing green force in the life cycle and the food chains of natural things that allows the miracle and the cycle of life to continue. Where the cycle of life and energy chains and food webs are healthy and robust, God is especially present. And where we have degraded those places to the point that life can no longer be supported . . . this is glossing Martin Buber, God in those places goes into eclipse. If the moon eclipses the sun the moon is still present, but it's in hiding. And this is what I think has happened today: that as we make war against the earth, as we degrade our natural home, we live in a time of God's absence. We live in a time of God going into eclipse; we live in a time of the shadow God. And it's not that God isn't real and alive and present, but we force God into the shadows when we continue to despoil and degrade.

We see above the seeds of Mark's despair in the face of the brokenness of our earth home. If we hurt the earth, we hurt God. In other words, degrading the natural world separates us from God. Hence, his need for hope and inspiration in the form of frequent direct experiences of places healthy enough to reveal the divine presence. Without these experiences of hope he would be crushed by the brokenness of creation. He needs to be reminded that places of death can become places of healing and wholeness once again.

### Reflections

What I found most significant about Mark's experiences is the centrality of God in avian form. In the beginning of the interview, he offered a conceptual structure of his

connection to Nature according to the elements (earth, water, wind and fire). However, very quickly his connection with experiencing God through birds came to the forefront and stayed there for most of the interview. His fascinating conception of God embodied in birds is deeply personal for him. This is a unique fleshing out of the concept of incarnation. God is not just about humans revealing the divine to other humans. God can enflesh Godself in any way God chooses.

Also, significant is the intention and expectation with which Mark approaches experiencing God in Nature. It doesn't just happen, he actively seeks this bonding regularly. It is a spiritual practice. He is seeking and being encountered but there is still room for surprise because he is available to the fullness of an experience without limiting it. His approach is humble and expectant, not haughty or demanding or presumptive.

I did not expect to be surprised much by my conversation with Mark because I was already so familiar with his professional persona and his work. However, the intensity of his need for connection with wildness did surprise me. There is a wild joy for him that wells up when he encounters areas that are left untouched and allowed to heal and thrive. Even if these places have been polluted or ravaged in the past, in their healing lays his hope and his healing. He reminds me of Gary Snyder in this need for the wild. Snyder said, "To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness."<sup>83</sup> This is definitely true for Mark. If he didn't have these experiences it would be crushing to him emotionally and spiritually. Experiencing a wild God full of surprises is crucial to his life and his theological work.

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83. Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 12.

Collectively, Mark's sharing points toward Nature as holding incarnations of God. Through Nature, he can commune in a reciprocal relationship with the divine. Human degradation of Nature separates humans from God. Nature is a source of hope for him by demonstrating an amazing capacity to heal given the chance.

## **Darby Kathleen Ray**

### Introduction

Darby K. Ray is Director of the Harward Center for Community Partnerships at Bates College, Lewiston, Maine, and is from the Anglican tradition. Darby received her doctorate in religion from Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, in 1996. She is active in building community-based collaborative partnerships. At the time of our interview she was professor of religion at Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi, where she explored the interconnections of human and ecological suffering within both a theological and economic framework. We spoke at her home in Jackson, Mississippi.

### Thematic Analysis

The three significant themes I have identified from Darby's text are: 1) *Being Relativized*, 2) *Being Held*, and 3) *God in Ocean*. The major points of contact in her life that best express how she experiences the Spirit in Nature include storms, the beach, and the ocean.

Underlying these themes is her conception of God as "viscerally present," and the interconnecting, the whole-making thing/place/time in which, "we feel both

fundamentally and comfortably at home and held.” At the same time that God is present in and through, God is also huge, a bit wild, and unknowable.

### *Being Relativized*

Darby has always been confident and extroverted and feels this can give her an overly strong sense of self. For this reason, she has found transformation in experiences that balance her sense of self in relationship to the hugeness of God. She calls these moments “relativizing” and “de-centralizing.” Instead of being unsettling in a negative way, these experiences have given Darby a sense of relationship and belonging; of understanding how she as a human creature fits within the cosmos.

The experience of being relativized began early in life with her affinity for going outside to twirl in the wind of an approaching storm. She referred to this childhood ritual as a “religious experience.” She grew up in a small town in central Florida where the climate brews frequent fierce thunderstorms that come inland from the ocean. I present this experience as a narrative:

Another storm was coming. Darby ran to the front door to look out the window. Towering thunderheads billowed upward and raced along, thicker by the second. She watched the leaves start to waiver and swirl around on the ground. The wind kicked up. Tree branches swayed. Darby turned and ran through the house like a swirling leaf. Blown into the arms of her mom, Darby begged to go outside and spin.

Out in her front yard in the wind, Darby ran around spinning with the leaves. Her arms outstretched and feet turning and turning her in circles. She spun like a whirling dervish. Faster and faster, losing the ability to control herself. Darby let the wind blow her about. She opened herself to the wildness of the gale. Darby’s little body was caught up in the awesome force of the oncoming storm, a child at home in the frenzy.

The root of the word relativized is ‘relative,’ meaning to have reference or relation to a person or something other than one’s self. Darby’s childhood experience helped her begin to understand her own being in relation to the world, and that there are things beyond her control. Impermanence and letting go are components of being relativized. She shared that building and letting go of sandcastles on the beach also taught her about impermanence.

And, these relativizing experiences in Nature for Darby continue to the present day, primarily through the ocean. However, because they are so powerful and multi-layered, resisting being pigeonholed into being only about relativizing, I will discuss Darby’s ocean experiences below in their own thematic section, *God in Ocean*. For now I will close my discussion of *Being Relativized* with Darby’s words of reflection on these experiences:

My voice and my power and my sense of ‘being at the center of things’ is being shattered in some way and so something has to break through: my sense of being in control. And that breakthrough is sort of what I associate with the sacred. That experience of being relativized and of being RE-centered into a much bigger sense of the All. . . . I, then, in a sense, have an expanded sense of self because I’m kind of taken up in this bigger thing.

### *Being Held*

Feeling held by the Spirit in Nature gives Darby a sense of home and evokes the preciousness of life. This is not home as in house or one particular place, but home as in a vaster sense of the whole, more of an eco-cosmological sense. These comforting and enveloping feelings are important to her in times of pain or challenge. The experiences are wrapped up with water imagery such as rain and flood, and gentle ocean waves.



To illustrate this concept, though it was emotionally difficult for her, Darby shared the experience of supporting her mother through cancer treatments after her mother's diagnosis with multiple melanomas. Darby was faced with the possibility of her mother dying and she was overwhelmed with the reality of how that might impact her family. She describes this time in her life in the following passage:

I remember flying home [to my parents' house], and it was really wild because right then in Florida there was huge amounts of rain. The lake that my parents live on was flooded up and the dock was completely covered in water. The water was rising in ways that had never happened before. I was there to be with my mother [during] surgery . . . and she was totally terrified. . . . There was no electricity [at their house] and the water was rising. . . . There was this sense of both being overwhelmed by the chaos of it, but also, realizing there's no other place we could be. There was a sense of being at home . . . I don't mean home as in the domicile, but home as in the earth, as God's body, as the place that births us and shelters us - - the location for making it through the suffering, the chaos, the anguish. [There was] this powerful sense of being held.

This being held gives her peace in the midst of the tumult of life. As a self-described control freak, feeling like she is not in control in life can be terrifying. Hence, the importance of meeting God in these places, "The experience of being out of control and yet held is for me the rawest experience of the divine."

Darby also feels held when she is floating on gentle ocean waves, a rhythmic roll of lifting up and down. The comfort she finds there gives her release as well: "I can just sit out there and it can just take all my worries away, just the constant sort of thing."

Darby describes a sense of the trustworthiness of the ocean. What she means by trustworthy is the ocean's predictableness or a sense it will always be there: "it's going to be there just like the sun is going to rise, the tides are going to come, the waves are going to keep breaking." This is deeply comforting for Darby because it reminds her of the

trustworthiness or ever-presence of the divine and helps her feel connected to a much great whole.

### *God in Ocean*

Communing with God in and near the ocean is Darby's most foundational and powerful experience in Nature. Thus far, I have only skimmed the surface of the breadth of Darby's encounters in ocean. Here, I discuss the full range of what happens for her there, where the Spirit is present in these moments, and the transformation she takes away. Like I touched on in *Being Held* above, her experience of the ocean might sometimes be gentle, like listening to a heartbeat. More often, it is the dramatic that she craves, encountering the All in the wild roil.

"I start with water," Darby said, ". . . a primary part of my physical environment always, obviously since in utero." She speaks of her time at the ocean as Sabbath time; out beyond the breakers she finds a gentleness like floating in amniotic fluid to the cadence of a mother's heartbeat. The ocean is like "the universe's amniotic fluid or something that is birthing all of this life and holding it, and, yet, it's also kind of terrifyingly, overwhelmingly, more than you can handle, or I can handle." This sense of being at the center or source of life and feeling such connectedness is sacramental, like "communion as [in] 'union with' . . . The ingesting of God: being so full of God that God is really inside of you. I think of being in the ocean as the same kind of thing: union with just everything."

She also has an intense need to be “tumbled” and “pounded” by surf, wild with a sense of danger, out of control within the waves’ grandeur and awesome power. So intense is the lure of the ocean’s tumult, that when the idea of the sublime was mentioned, Darby dismissed it as too “tame” a concept for her. Perhaps the sublime has been romanticized in art, poetry, and prose, to the point that it can feel a bit tranquil or painfully beautiful in a sweet transcendent way. But there is a dark side to the sublime, a raw and terrifying storminess that seems appropriately resonant with Darby’s experience. Still, her immediate rejection of the concept revealed the depth of her passion for finding the All in the wild frenzy. When her children were too young to be by themselves on the shore, Darby could not run wildly into the fray: “It was very painful for me because, really getting out there in the tumble of it is . . . a religious experience, no doubt.” She is clear that she does not equate God and the ocean as the same thing, but it is in the ocean where she feels the closest to the divine.

Darby made a point of sharing that her passion for the ocean is supported by, but not shared or fully understood by her spouse, Ray. Her need to experience the ocean tumult, however, is too strong to be ignored. These “Tumbling with God” ocean encounters are too numerous to recount, so the following narrative seeks to capture the essence of these iconic experiences:

The surf had risen as the hot afternoon winds whipped it up into a good and proper churn. Darby was off to indulge herself in a tumble. Based on past experience, she knew she would get beat up by those waves, but she went back time and time again. Sometimes she emerged from a pounding roll with angry raspberries from being dredged in the sea floor. Rarely, she would get briefly pinned to the bottom, momentarily disoriented, having missed a ride and suffered the full weight of an eight-foot wall of water. She always got a bathing suit full of sand.

But on days like this, when all the elements aligned, amidst the beating, she found herself floating weightless for a moment along the pinnacle of the perfect curl. The bruises were worth it. She was tireless, going back for more. When she finally emerged, she glowed.

The awe of tumbling is increased by the opacity of the sea at the Atlantic Coast. It lacks the crystal clarity that the Gulf and Caribbean are known for. The sea is, “dark and it’s swirly and there’s a lot of mystery there.” Drawing upon the words of her friend, theologian Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, Darby described her “sense of life all the way down, life all the way through . . . that’s kind of my experience of the world, is God all the way down, God all the way through.”

Being at home in the ocean is about Darby experiencing and being a part of the interconnections of all life, of being part of the All, a creating life force, powerful and transformative: “This God flows everywhere and I have no control, and I celebrate that, I’m buoyed up; but, I’m also very aware that there are depths that I can’t fathom.”

There is another dimension to Darby’s experiencing God in ocean. She does not just encounter the sacredness of ocean and then leave it behind until the next visit. She is transformed by it. Therefore, I will close the discussion of this theme with Darby’s words on how finding God in ocean motivates her to want to live as ethically as she can:

Those experiences of immersion in the All, of salty communion (union with) with the universe, give me a taste of the world as it should be—of the kinship that is the most fundamental truth of Creation. In so doing, those experiences fuel a kind of holy dissatisfaction with the way things are; a deep desire to do away with the myriad obstacles to planetary flourishing. So the ocean “retreat” is not so much a respite from the real world as a tiny taste of its possible transformation—a taste that makes me hungry for precisely that transformation and that sends me back into my familiar “landlubbing” world with fresh conviction and courage for the justice work at hand.

## Reflections

What I found most significant is what Darby’s experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature reveal about the danger of God. Tumbling with God helps her overcome

egocentrism and gives her perspective about what is important. The danger Darby speaks of is about God drawing her in and transforming her into a better person. Get too close to God and one might have to change. Change can be frightening and painful and dangerous.

I was surprised by the depth of Darby's passion for encountering God in Ocean. I think these ocean experiences are about touching wildness. The elemental wildness of the ocean is metaphoric of the wildness of God. Wildness for Darby draws her into turning outward and transcending self. Even as a child, she does not fear the elemental wildness. As an adult, even knowing how impacted and polluted the world oceans are by humans does not diminish the power of her experiences. She has to have these experiences regardless of whether others understand. It is where she feels God most fully.

Collectively, Darby's sharing points toward Nature as a catalyst for positive transformation. As God is in and through all, God can reach out through Nature to offer comfort and release, and lets her know when she needs to change something about herself. And, as God is the All that connects all life, communing with Nature is both a physical and a spiritual experience.

**Anthony (Tony) J. Chvala-Smith**

Introduction

Anthony (Tony) Chvala-Smith is Assistant Professor of Theology and Scripture at Community of Christ Seminary, Independence, MO, and Graceland University, Lamoni,

IA, and is from the Community of Christ tradition. He is a biblical scholar and a historical theologian interested in how classic Western religious texts can inspire social, gender, and ecological justice. Tony received his doctorate in religious studies from Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1993, with a primary concentration in New Testament Scripture and secondary concentration in Historical and Systematic Theology. I spoke with Tony at Community of Christ International Headquarters, Independence, Missouri.

### Thematic Analysis

The four significant themes I have identified from Tony's text are: 1) *A Breathing Presence*, 2) *Stillness, Beauty, and Awe*, 3) *Intuitive Awareness*, and 4) *Assurance*. While Tony's experiences in natural places are vast, the major points of contact in his life that best express how he experiences the Spirit in Nature include his grandparent's home in Michigan, woods in Michigan and elsewhere, and surprise encounters during his daily life. Underlying these themes is his conception of an attentive God being nearby, ever present, in and through all things.

#### *A Breathing Presence*

From childhood, Tony experienced the Spirit in Nature as the wind in trees, a breathing presence. As a child, he had no language to describe these early experiences, but, through his teen years and young adulthood, he slowly grew into understanding of

that presence being divine. For Tony, the divine is not present in a benign or passive way, but is actively present and attentive.

Around the age of eight, Tony's family moved in with his grandparents for a couple of years and then again around age 14. By the house, there were two magnificent tress red maples. He spent a great deal of time under those trees with his grandparents and it changed his life:

They [his grandparents] were these stable figures and their home was a stable place. . . . There was a time in my own family, when my parents weren't very stable. So, Grandma and Grandpa's place was this spot. Sitting with them under the trees was deeply anchoring. . . . Interestingly, Grandma and Grandpa never talked about religion at all, and yet there was something I would call spiritual about sitting with them there.

This special time in his life helped contribute to his sense of trees being alive. He noticed that the air near trees seemed different, and that there was "this sense of breath under them. [It was] cooler under the trees; air kind of flows down through them."

Tony was in high school when his family had moved to a farm that offered him lots of land to explore and he "walked every inch" of it while out hunting. At that time in his life he was not a practicing Christian. Yet, he remembered, even as a non-religious person, feeling the presence of something. It is an interesting memory for a person who later would become a theologian. His childhood impression of the aliveness of trees was expanding to an awareness of presence, though that other remained nameless. Tony explained,

Walking through the woods, and fields, and meadows, and swamps . . . I remember just feeling this *Other* that's there. I can understand why native peoples develop the kinds of spiritualities they do. Because when you are in the woods and are attentive, it's almost like you can feel something breathing in it. . . . It's this

sense that everything around you is alive, that it's reflecting something back to you. It's like a fogged awareness that there's more here than just tasty squirrels.

As a young adult his relationship to this presence in trees advanced to a deeper level and became more like a conversation. He sensed a "whispering" in the trees that he experienced on several occasions as a motivating influence at that pivotal time of life. "When I was in my mid-20s, late 20s, I used to have this experience of hearing a particular kind of wind in the trees that would connote to me urgency." These times were like an encouragement to make decisions or otherwise move forward in his life. The experience of aliveness, wind, and breath had congealed into a presence that responds and cares.

His resonating with God in this way came clear, "when I started studying theology and started learning about Spirit and *Ruach* and *Pneuma* – it made immanent sense to me that, that the words for Spirit and breath and wind would be the same." But what strikes me is that Tony has this sense of Other long before any theological doctrine shaped his thinking of the natural world. His early experiences were foundational to how Tony continues to experience God in Nature.

### *Stillness, Beauty, and Awe*

There is a strong association for Tony that experiences resonant with the awe and beauty of Nature are also experiences of God. Being still in natural places has helped him become much more open and vulnerable to divine presence. Natural spaces both feel still to Tony, and help him be still and at peace. Solitude can be an important component



of these experiences, but is not a requirement. The surprise of an unexpected encounter can lead Tony into a transformative state of awe.

Tony shared with me about a night several years ago—he was outside with his cat Jacob and experienced an arresting surprise that he described as “a transfiguration moment.” This moment is presented here as a narrative retelling:

It was after ten and time for Jacob’s walk. Insistent meows helped Tony and Charmaine chase out the last of their Sunday evening Bible study group. As Charmaine straightened furniture and gathered empty tea mugs, Tony took Jacob out. A very particular cat, Jacob would proudly walk the neighborhood on a leash. Tony felt the crisp early March air as he turned down the driveway headed for the backyard where Jacob liked to poke around.

Suddenly, Tony stopped in his tracks as he heard a honk from overhead. There it was again and getting closer. It wasn’t the musical trumpeting of Canada geese. No, this was much more of a high-pitched bark. Snow geese. Tony looked up searching the night sky. Out of the blackness they came, in formation, perhaps a dozen. He could see the outline of them as they were illuminated from beneath by the glow of city lights. He could hear their wings as they flew right over the treetops in his backyard and right over his head. Why were they flying so low? Were they disoriented by the street lights and lit homes? He lost sight of them but could still hear yelping honks as they flew further away. But then they circled back over the neighborhood once again before disappearing into the night, their calls fading away to the north.

Tony stood utterly transfixed, barely breathing, unable to break the enchantment. He stood frozen until no trace of them remained but the resonance of their grace and beauty aflame within him.

When he and Jacob returned to the house, Charmaine noticed the transformation. She said he was glowing. “I’d seen this thing, kind of a burning bush-like experience . . . there was this sense of absolute wonder . . . breathtaking.” The encounter was literally stunning and he was totally present and opened by it. It was a spiritual moment so powerful that it changed his physical countenance. This surprise gift reminded Tony

“that there’s more to the world, more to nature, than randomness. Of course, there is randomness, but there’s also something *Other* in it that’s not random.”

Because he feels the Spirit so immanently amongst trees, praying in the woods is as natural to Tony as breathing. “I associate praying with woods: I’m fully present; I’m completely alone; yet I’m aware that there’s another present. And, it’s still – it’s just the jays or whatever – the woods noises are part of the stillness, they don’t strike me as noise.” As a theologian, Tony spends more time in churches than he does outside, but despite this occupational reality, he still often finds it more powerful to pray alone in the woods:

I love solitude and I think that comes from all of my years of hunting. Where hunting was . . . like a meditative state in which I was completely in the moment and focused on what I was doing, and completely there. I’m somewhat ashamed to say I have a hard time being that [way] in church unless I’m doing something like preaching. Though when I have opportunity to go to a cathedral or particularly a Catholic or Anglican church – there’s something about those churches that is similar to the woods, especially if they’re old, they’re dark, there’s lots of wood, there’s quiet. The kind of feeling I feel in them is similar to the feeling I feel in the woods. But, in the woods I experience solitude and a sense of being shadowed by the trees. And thus an environment in which I can be more open and honest in praying.

The solitude component referred to here, while important to his attitude of prayerfulness, is not always required, as evidenced in the following experience Tony shared that took place in the woods near Princeton University in New Jersey. Tony was in seminary, and he and Charmaine (spouse) were dating long distance then and struggling for clarity in their relationship. He was anxious about his studies and anxious about their future. Tony’s roommates had surprised him, pooling their money together to buy a one-way plane ticket for Charmaine to visit New Jersey for his birthday. She arrived a week

before the Thanksgiving break for time together before driving to Michigan for Thanksgiving with Tony's family. The following narrative retelling captures the experience:

On a hike through the nearby woods, they talked and walked and talked some more. At one point they stopped at a quiet place and prayed out loud together about their relationship and future.

Into that blessed stillness, a deer emerged from the trees and out onto the trail maybe twenty yards away. It was an albino! It had one brown spot on its shoulder but the rest of it was absolutely white. Charmaine and Tony stood there frozen, still holding hands. During all the time he had spent hunting the woods of Michigan he had never seen an albino deer. "It doesn't see us," he whispered to Charmaine. The deer nonchalantly flicked its tail and ambled across the trail right in front of them.

It was a sign; they had been heard. Each looked at their future spouse with wide smiles and sparkling eyes that said it all: They were going to be okay. And, they were.

The albino deer experience will be revisited below again as other layers of thematic interpretation emerge. Tony said his "arresting" moments discussed above are like the Spirit whispering, "Pay attention; it's not about you. It's something big going on here." Such experiences for Tony have deepened his consciousness and intimacy with Nature, and have led to a greater understanding of and deepened relationship with a creating and indwelling God.

### *Intuitive Awareness*

The intuitive or intuition within theological terms means "contemplation" (Latin). The Westminster Theological Dictionary defines intuitive: "Knowledge of something that comes without the use of the senses. Some consider this to be the means by which persons created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28) attain knowledge of God." Another

word associated with “intuition” is “intuitionism” (Latin: *intueri*, “to look at”): “The view that mystical knowledge can be directly conveyed to the mind itself, as in a ‘flash of insight’ which is more profound than reason or sense experience. In ethics, the view that basic moral principles or rightness are known intuitively rather than by any other discernment process.”<sup>84</sup>

But these conventional definitions do not fit Tony’s experiences in that his “intuition” is coupled with or depends upon his sensory experiences. Differing from the definition above, that separates the “reason” and “sense experience” from “intuition” (as defined), Tony’s experiences of God in Nature are much more wholistically expressed. While delving deeper into this potential shortfall within conventional theology is beyond the scope of my phenomenological study, it could provide fertile ground for the inquisitive ecotheologian.

The concept of a “gut-feeling” might be a way to describe Tony’s sense of the divine presence in place. And this gut-feeling is not the rational and/or theologically structured argument one might expect from a professional theologian. Rather, three of Tony’s experiences tell of times when he was dealing with life stresses or decision-making and found resolve through his intuitive awareness of God in Nature (e.g., theological exams; family tensions as a child, and finding a safe place with his grandparents; and working through the early part of his relationship with Charmaine). Knowing Tony well, there is no doubt he thought and questioned and pondered

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84. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 60.

excessively at these times in his life – intense head stuff. Yet his shared experiences do not reflect this rational-thinking self, they reflect an intuitive-spiritual-sensory self.

Whether in the woods or fishing on a lake or at a beloved church campground, Tony experienced this awareness of a close presence with him in these special places. His senses were acute and heightened to his surroundings. It was not an intellectual process but rather a sensory relationship. There was something there that was not visible to him in the same way a tree is visible, but he felt it. He described that it was more of an intuition of a presence being there with him, of watching out for him, a presence that was steady and always there. A presence that could not be gazed upon directly but indirectly through his awareness of Nature. Trying to explain this sense of awareness, Tony said,

I'm trying to find language here to describe this, of course as a conceptual thinker I would do that. But, my experience of the Spirit in Nature is more mystical. . . . mysticism is a horribly vague term, but, I guess for me it primarily has to do with the intuitive awareness of and participation in divine reality. . . but it's being present to what's divine in a less verbal way.

As his senses are engaged and lead to an intuitive awareness of God in that place, his rational-thinking self finds rest from its usual dominance. This comingling of engaged senses and intuition while the mind rests is key to Tony's intuitive awareness of the Spirit in Nature.

### *Assurance*

Tony's experience of the Spirit in Nature has always been reassuring. Feelings associated with experiencing divinity in this way include a sense of being watched over, listened to, cared for, and encouraged. These moments are not fearful or menacing, they

are safe and comforting. Tony speculates that perhaps the very specific landscape of his Michigan homeland played a key role in cultivating this feeling safe with natural places.

Some of Tony's experiences which lead to feeling assured have already been shared in detail in other thematic sections above. Examples include being under his grandparents' red maples, hunting alone in the woods, and encountering the albino deer with Charmaine. Part of this assurance is a sense of being watched by a present God that the landscape reflects to him: "in the woods I feel completely alone, and yet at the same time I feel like I'm being watched. And it's not a discomfoting feeling."

He feels he has the Michigan woods to thank for being a safe context within which to commune with God. Having this sense of place is not generic – it is not necessarily transferrable to any place anywhere. Tony's experience was shaped by the specific particularities of his special place:

The woods I grew up in did not have poisonous snakes, didn't have ticks, and didn't have things that would hurt me or eat me – so I have no idea what this would be like in [say] Mississippi . . . probably not the same. (chuckles) And I know when we've traveled to Africa, the jungles and woods seem menacing to me there. Because I know there's lots of poisonous things in them, and things that find me tasty . . . [At home] even black bears were very rare. . . . So, the woods never felt menacing to me, they always felt safe.

In the woods, Tony has felt, heard, and encountered God. This was an important aspect of the albino deer experience with Charmaine described earlier. It was a "key moment" in their relationship and a powerful spiritual experience that was too serendipitous to be discountable as mere coincidence:

I think we both immediately had this sense that we were being listened to, that the timing was just too, too weird. And this sense that there was something unique about what we have. The deer kind of reinforced that – really unique creature –

and just reinforced the sense of uniqueness that we felt about our relationship. . . . It happened that we were praying at the time, and in the woods, and it just was too eerily well timed.

A final expression of being assured by God is Tony feeling a sense of the “okayness of things.” Tony shared an experience from the summer before his doctoral exams. Needless to say, it was a time of intense stress, fear and doubt. He was at a church camp in Michigan:

I remember a particular sunrise service. We met on the lake shore – those who wanted to get up that early – to pray about the camp and each other . . . looking out over the lake. . . I was in the middle of my PhD study and so very critically minded . . . living and thinking in a different world from the people around [me on the shore]. . . . But for a moment I was able to step out of that and listen to the words of the song [that was playing] and be with people and look out over the lake, and I had this sense that it was going to be okay, whatever it was, it was going to be okay.

There is a divine presence with him that watches out for him, that listens to him, that comforts and reassures him during times of challenge. And Tony’s knowing this and being reminded of this makes him feel like all is as it should be.

## Reflections

What I found most significant about Tony’s experiences is the sense of them being a gift given by the Spirit through Nature, a gift that can be less problematic than the biblical witness. Tony calls this an experience of divine grace because the gift, “is always being given and you’re not in charge of it. You’re just not in control of it.” In the wildness of Nature, it is possible for the direct experience of God to be less mediated or baggage-laden than in the sacred text. It is not that Nature is more important or more

revelatory than scripture; it is that people tend to muddle and misuse the witness of the sacred text. Tony pointed out that, “we humans love to muck around with words so we’re constantly trying to control things with them, so it [the Bible] is often less an experience of grace as it could be.” And, the natural world can only be an experience of grace if we step off our treadmills long enough to pay attention. And, when we degrade wild spaces, we diminish their ability to reflect that divine grace.

I was most surprised by discovering this mystical side of Tony that was unknown to me. Having known him the longest of any participant, I know he is ultra-analytical. But there is this dimension to him that is not at all analytical and that feels God intuitively, completely superseding or transcending his rational-brain-thinking self. As a person who lives by words, he struggled to find words because experiencing God in Nature is such a feeling thing for him, not a thinking thing.

I was also surprised by Tony’s passionate statement about theology and Nature that emerged at the end of our conversation without any prompting more specific than my asking, “Any other thoughts you’d like to share?” I find these words particularly moving in light of Tony being a New Testament scholar, not an ecotheologian:

I think it’s very important that theology have something to say about the natural world and the environment, because we’re linked – we *are* a part of the environment. And so to harm it is to harm ourselves. There are a lot of ethical implications for all this. I mean I can’t even bear to see the oil-covered sea creatures [reference to the 2010 BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico]. . . I can’t describe how deeply it grieves me. So I think that’s part of this sense of connection that developed in me over years of spending lots of time in the woods and water.



Collectively, Tony's sharing points toward the importance of natural places to his spiritual health, and toward Nature as mediating his relationship with God through sensory experience. Relationship with Nature allows God to meet his needs in very real ways. It is important to pay attention to the presence of the Spirit in Nature and to cultivate that relationship.

## **Priscilla Eppinger**

### Introduction

Priscilla Eppinger is Professor of religion at Graceland University, Lamoni Iowa, and for the Community of Christ Seminary, Independence, Missouri, and is from the American Baptist tradition. In 2002, she received her doctorate in religion from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. She is a contemporary and historical theologian focusing on religion and ecology, environmental ethics, feminist theology, and contemporary theologies and culture. We spoke at her home in Lamoni, Iowa.

### Thematic Analysis

The three significant themes I have identified from Priscilla's text are: 1) *Connectedness*, 2) *Awareness*, and 3) *Relationships*. These themes emerged during discussing the two major points of contact in her life that best express how she experiences the Spirit in Nature. The first is gardening which, as she has moved to different locales, has come both in the form of her own private gardens at home, and

within a larger urban community garden association. The second is through her relationship with her two cats, Osiris and Ramses.

Underlying these themes is Priscilla's conception of God as immanently present in and through all life, "recognizing God as the source of life that underlies and is integrally part of the entire world. . . . I'm less and less sold on the idea of God as a being that is external to everything, apart from everything. . . . [The] presence of God is not a third party external being, but that blessing of life; companionship, love and support."

### *Connectedness*

Paramount to Priscilla's experience of the Spirit in Nature is a sense of connectedness with the world. This being with includes all forms of life: earth, plant, animal, people, and natural processes. And, it can even transcend time itself, as in, a sense of connection to others who were in the past and those who will be present in the future. Her sense of connectedness has grown over time as she has expanded her definitions of relationship, community, and responsibility to include those other than humans.

Being with Nature is spiritual to Priscilla: "spirituality in a kind of generic, and not necessarily Christian sense, is an awareness of connection and connectedness." Being with Nature has broadened her world view:

The community that I'm a part of includes more than humans. . . . A sense of ecosystems having all these interrelationships is not new knowledge. But [I'm] thinking more intentionally about what the human place is in those ecosystems, rather than thinking animals have their ecosystem and then we live next door or

somehow separate. That kind of permeability or boundary between those communities is something I've become increasingly aware of or sensitive to.

However, Priscilla's growing awareness and deepening connections have also been a source of pain and loss. The reality of having experienced a deep sense of connection is that losing it hurts. Priscilla lived in Massachusetts at a parsonage and there she tended a large herb garden for eight years. Having to leave it when she moved to Evanston, Illinois, outside of Chicago, was a painful loss, as Priscilla had invested in the garden much of her heart, time, energy, and resources. She had bonded with the garden as sacred space, so it was difficult for her to lose a place that had been so special.

That herb garden was the first place Priscilla became cognizant that gardening for her is a spiritual exercise. While she has had outdoor experiences such as camping and hiking, it is through gardening that she experiences Nature as a regular part of her life. "I consider gardening one of my spiritual practices. . . . Its spiritual practice partly because of this sense of feeling connected . . . it's just this very strong sense of being connected to the world." This way of being with the world gives her mental rest because gardening is, "more just an experience of being. The garden is one of the few places where the analytical part of my mind is not activated. . . . And maybe that's one of the reasons that I feel that sense of connectedness there is because I'm not analyzing it so much."

Feeling connected to the world informs, for Priscilla, a sense of responsibility for its wellbeing. She feels responsible to care for the world that has been given to her by those who have come before, and to protect and tend it for the future. There is no sense

of ownership over the world, but rather a feeling responsible to care for it during the present time and into the future.

As a theologian, Priscilla has given much thought to the Christian concept of stewardship and, in her own work, continues to explore, “a different lens than stewardship for the way Christians ought to relate to the natural world. . . . Look around us, we’ve got the stewardship language and all these ideas and it doesn’t work in that we’re not taking very good care of things.” She realizes, through gardening, that there is some degree of her personal choice in how she chooses to shape interactions with her world. Sometimes there are things beyond control, and other times there are choices to be considered. She believes it is important to be responsible in making decisions. For example, rabbits are a challenge in her garden, but rather than trap, poison, or otherwise exclude them, she considers them members of her community and tries work out a balance for the rabbits to have a little food and still have a good harvest for herself. Her conception of stewardship appears to reject the erroneous owner-overlord-steward imagery still present in much of Christianity, and embrace a more authentic responsible-participant-steward.

In the midst of relocating to the Chicago area, Priscilla was feeling disconnected after the loss of her herb garden and from, “moving into a city, don’t know anyone, and living in an apartment . . . no outdoor space that was mine.” Little did she know how deeply her craving to reconnect with the earth would be met. After moving into her new apartment, she put her bike into the empty moving truck and drove to the rental company. Serendipitously, as she pedaled her way back, she discovered a community garden not

too far from her new home. As she stopped to investigate, she struck up a conversation with an elderly woman who was tending a plot. Instead of only sharing the details of who to contact for a plot, the woman gave Priscilla fresh picked tomatoes and green beans. This simple act of generosity from a total stranger surprised and touched her.

After being on the garden's waitlist for a season, Priscilla chose that same plot when she learned that the dear lady was no longer gardening after tending the plot for fourteen years. The garden manager told her the plot was weedy but had excellent soil because the elderly woman was a "real gardener." During the time Priscilla tended that plot, she always remembered with deep gratitude the spontaneous generosity that bonded her to that new place in meaningful ways. It also added another dimension to her sense of stewardship, "This garden plot did not belong to me. It was mine for while I was there. I had a responsibility toward it. I also had this very strong sense of being connected to the other people, past and future, who would be part of that garden. . . . [The] experience in that community garden for me was an incredible experience of what I would consider stewardship."

### *Awareness*

A sense of connectedness would not be possible for Priscilla without being aware, present, and open in the moment. God is in and through all life, not separate from, not external. To experience the divine, which for Priscilla is always present, the willingness to perceive is a requirement. Awareness could be described as the prerequisite for

acknowledging interconnectedness, and the sense of connection seems to be the center or core of her experience of the Spirit in Nature:

Experiencing God in some fashion happens all the time. It's a matter of awareness, perception. An awareness of the presence of God is an awareness of life. . . . being there and noticing things – being able to pay attention to what's growing, what's working, what's not . . . the kinds of things that you become aware of only when you're there to notice it, to notice where the wind comes from and where the sun hits and to interact with the conditions that you can't control. . . . One of the things that happens to me while I'm gardening is . . . a kind of focus of mind and heart . . . it's kind of a retreat. I usually am able to just be in the present, to be in the space with the dirt and the plants and not be thinking about other things. [It's a] meditative sort of focusing, an intentional practice.

Nature is both witnessing and being witnessed. Nature witnesses to us of God's presence and we witness God's presence within Nature, both human and other than human. To give and receive of this divinity is mutually blessing and enriching. Her cats, Osiris and Ramses, witness of this divinity to her. A practice that Priscilla engages in on almost a daily basis is sitting and talking to them and telling them how blessed they are together. "I'm not saying that I sense the presence of God as some kind of spirit that inhabits my cats. But in a funny way, I am saying that they represent to me the presence of God in my life. This is truly a blessing." For Priscilla, to not be aware of this witness would lead to an impoverishment of her life experience, "Look at the benefits we have that we could be blind to. Isn't this wonderful that we benefit each other? And, how much less rich our three lives could be. . . . I guess to me an awareness of the presence of God is an awareness of life, which does not sound extraordinary but perhaps that *is* what's extraordinary."

The witness of these ordinary cats within the daily round of an ordinary life, and the witness of an ordinary generous woman in her ordinary garden plot, became extraordinary blessings to Priscilla because of her willingness to be aware and be “cognizant of the kind of blessing that we receive and give because it’s a mutual thing.”

### *Relationships*

Priscilla places much importance on relationships and credits this to her theological training and experience as a minister. Relationship cultivates a larger sense of being and awareness of the connectedness of life and the presence of the divine within it all. Interrelatedness is about relationship and a sense of community is key to relationship building. Ecological relationships have expanded her awareness of a larger sense of community that includes human and other than human Nature. “I think an increasing theological understanding of relationships as being a key aspect of Christianity, of Christian belief, both experiential and intellectual. Expanding that to the other than human members of the community has really come just in the last couple of years as I’ve done more work with ecology.”

Priscilla’s ecological theology work began about six to seven years ago and has included her study of both theology and science and the dialogue across these schools of thought. She sees no conflict between science and theology, only interrelatedness and compatibility. They are both based on particular worldviews and biases. They both help us try to understand and explain our world. “The challenge for me at this point is in working on constructing a Christian worldview that takes science seriously without being

taken over.” This is an interesting commentary on healthy relationships: interrelatedness is balanced where one is on equal footing rather than being dominated by the other.

### Reflections

What I found most significant about Priscilla’s experiences is her expanding a sense of relationship to include human interrelationship with God and Nature. God’s presence in and through all helps her maintain care and compassion for human beings while simultaneously seeing Nature as her neighbor. The care is mutual with people, land, and creature. God is in her relationships, be it with her cats, her garden, or a random stranger sharing produce. This sense of interrelationship is so important to her that its absence would be impoverishment in her life. The most significant outcome of this expansion of relationship is that it makes her want to better care for the earth.

Also significant is how Nature, especially in the form of her garden, helps Priscilla transcend the obsessively analytical mind in order to experience the present moment in the presence of place. This is a regular meditative space she has created to feel connected and find retreat, giving her a “focus of mind and heart.” This is an important place of balance for a “head person” who typically interfaces with the world through her intellect.

I was surprised by Priscilla’s well developed sense of an eco-centric ethic. While I knew her professionally prior to the interview, I did not know she is such an environmentalist. It gives me hope that such a strong environmental ethic can emerge even from experiences within a more urban setting. It doesn’t have to be wilderness, it can be a small community garden plot.



Collectively, Priscilla's sharing points toward Nature as neighbor (a caring community of interrelationship), and Nature as sacred space (setting for spiritual practice). As God is the source of life underlying and integrally part of the world, Nature witnesses to her of God and is interconnected with her. Relationship with God in and through Nature leads her to a desire to be responsible for and care for the earth. A caring human relationship with Nature is mutually blessing and enriching.

### Results Chapter Summary

The intent of this chapter was to present the results of many pages of interview transcripts in an accessible way, and to support and enliven the key themes that I discerned in each conversation through direct quotations and narrative retellings of my participants' lived experiences. These lived experiences revealed diverse expressions of experiencing God in and through Nature. This chapter summary will accomplish the following: 1) highlight themes of concurrence among participants, 2) highlight themes of contrast among participants, 3) Transition into looking at the collective lived experiences as a whole in the next chapter.

#### *Concurrence: Meeting of needs*

There were a number of themes that demonstrated how my participants had their needs met when they sought God in and through Nature. Most often these themes had a positive nuance, such as, *soothing* and *emptying* (release of negative emotions and excessive mind chatter); *opening* and *communing* (feeling loved, tended to, connected,

and encouraged); and *transformation* (finding peace and resolve). However, under the theme of *transformation* the lived experience could leave one feeling a bit disrupted (seeing areas for improvement in oneself, or motivation to move forward in life, or finding courage to make a difference in the world), albeit for the purpose of a positive outcome.

### *Contrast: Safety vs. danger*

For the most part my participants felt safe in Nature, as expressed through themes such as *comfort*, *assurance*, and *feeling cared for*. Perception of physical danger was not a regular part of experiencing the divine in and through Nature for four of my five participants. I do not know why this is the case. Perhaps it is because theologians typically might not be extreme sports enthusiasts. Or, perhaps, because in imminent danger might interfere with their ability to experience the Spirit through Nature as a spiritual practice. There was, of course, one flagrant exception: Darby Ray's repeated and deliberate seeking out experiences in potentially dangerous thunderstorms or skin-bruising rough ocean surf, because of her need to feel *relativized and reoriented in relation to God*. I suspect that with further study more of these types of lived experiences of the danger of the numinous might emerge.

While the above Results chapter shared the particulars of each participant's lived experience of the Spirit in and through Nature, the following Synthesis chapter looks at the whole of the collective lived experiences of my participants in a more general way.

The beauty of phenomenology as a research method lies in its ability to get in deep with the details of experience of a phenomenon while listening for more universal insights that might emerge. The Synthesis chapter will explore larger emerging themes that point toward the possible applicability of my research.

## Chapter 5

### Synthesis of Research

[W]e shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

#### Introduction

Synthesizing themes particular to my participants' religious lived experience of the Spirit in and through Nature into more general structures of meaning will be helpful in understanding the applicability of the research results presented in Chapter Four. At this point of synthesis, unifying the anecdotes (narratives) of these lived experiences into applicable structures of meaning takes place within a relationship of tension between the particular and the universal. Max van Manen described this tension as a paradox: "The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something *particular* while really addressing the *general* or the *universal*. And vice versa, at the hand of anecdote fundamental insights or truths are tested for their value in the contingent world of everyday experience."<sup>85</sup> To be clear, phenomenological research does not seek out empirical generalizations; the wholesale transfer of one person's lived experience to another's. We can ask what meanings are being revealed through study of a phenomenon and look for the insights those meanings might illuminate.

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85. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 120.

I have chosen to organize this synthesis according to the four fundamental existential themes Van Manen suggests are the, “ground by way of which all human beings experience the world.”<sup>86</sup> To avoid confusion in referring to the more particular themes of the phenomenon studied, I will follow Van Manen’s language referring to the fundamental themes as the four *existentials*.<sup>87</sup> While it is helpful for the purpose of a research study to differentiate among the existentials, it is important to note that they are all in operation as an inseparable whole where, “one existential always calls forth the other.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, though I may explore an emerging theme through the framework of its dominant existential, I do recognize all four are always in play.

The below four sections each focus on one of the four existentials, 1) Lived Space, 2) Lived Body, 3) Lived Time, and 4) Lived Relation. At the beginning of each section, the existential is first defined and then used as a lens through which to explore one emerging theme from my research. An emerging theme is a broad category that surfaced when considering the whole of my participants’ collective lived experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature. During this consideration I asked the question, “What is the whole showing me about lived space (or time or body or relation) as it relates to potential applications of the research to theology?” This chapter ends with a section exploring the implications for theological practice.

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86. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 102.

87. *Ibid.*, 101.

88. *Ibid.*, 105.

## Lived Space

Lived space is how we experience or, in other words, how we feel the spaces or places with which we encounter. Space and place are used here synonymously. Like all the existentials, lived space is about how the immediate lived experience is felt in a pre-verbal way.<sup>89</sup> While at this point, I am beyond discussion of the particulars of my participants' lived experiences, this emphasis on immediacy reminds me, the researcher, to stay close to and return again and again to the phenomenon as experienced by participants, even along this pathway of interpretation.

The lived space emerging theme is *Nature can be experienced as sacred space*. The whole of my participants lived experiences of the divine in and through Nature revealed this concept of Nature feeling like sacred space to them. A sacred space is a place in which they are aware of the divine presence.

In and through their particular places in Nature, they were able to experience God regardless of whether the places were nearby or were once-in-a-lifetime trips to faraway places. Participants tended to frequent known places. Perhaps this is a product of necessity as, like many of us, they are busy people with careers that limit the regular scope of their lives to nearby geography. Regularly visiting familiar and deeply known places in Nature with the intention of being open to God's presence for my participants was like a spiritual practice (explored further in Lived Time below). Then there are those experiences that took place in out-of-the-ordinary places, outside the context of the daily round. Having no prior knowledge of a natural place did not limit my participants'

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89. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 102.

ability to encounter it as a sacred space, because, “God is always already everywhere,” “all creation is charged with sacred presence,” “this God flows everywhere,” and “God is really that Spirit which is the relation of the relation.”

The places in Nature that fostered lived experience of the Spirit for my participants were broad in scale and type. A scan of the following list will refresh us on the breadth of lived spaces revealed in the previous chapter. What constituted a place in the natural world was left open for participants to express; therefore, it is interesting to be aware that the list reflects spaces that could be considered remote wilderness and spaces that might be just outside the door of one’s home or office building.

- University campuses and arboretums
- Mountain landscape
- Grass in a lawn
- Backyard or frontyard near a house
- Garden (home or community setting)
- Woods and trees
- Tropical Rainforest
- Pond and lake
- Ocean
- Sandy beach

The lived space of Nature was also experienced as sacred even though a particular place might not be pristine (as in, no environmental degradation or negative human impact). Even though they are not all ecotheologians, my participants are all very aware and informed about environmental issues and they understand that there are often negative human impacts in the places they love to visit. There were expressed feelings of despair in witnessing degraded places and hope that resulted from being in places that

were healing. Still, no one shared with me lived experiences that pointed toward destroyed or visually ugly natural places being related to as sacred spaces. No one was seeking God in the local landfill or open pit mine. Perhaps there is a threshold at which a place in Nature becomes so degraded that one no longer feels comfortable there or is perceptive to its sacredness.

Probably the most important aspect of the lived space of Nature for my participants is that it meets their need for a sacred space outside of or free from the parameters of institutional structure and doctrine. I learned from them that Nature offers a sacred space in which to experience revelations of God in a particularly unconstrained way. They used words like “spontaneous” and “bubbling up” to describe the experiences. Also, being alone in the sacred space of Nature helped facilitate freedom of expression in being with God—being more open and honest, or being vulnerable.

### Lived Body

Lived body acknowledges “...the phenomenological fact that we are always bodily in the world.”<sup>90</sup> This is the corporeal realm of the senses, and how sensory input guides how we experience a phenomenon in the physicality of our bodies. The mind is certainly a part of the body, but the immediate physical-sensory input of lived experience is primarily pre-conscious, or affecting the psyche in unconscious ways. While the whole of body-mind-spirit is inseparable, focusing in on the lived body aspect of religious lived

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90. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 103.



experience is helpful especially in light of Christian theology that tends to denigrate the body as discussed previously.<sup>91</sup>

The emerging theme associated with lived body aspects of my participants' lived experience is *Experiencing God in and through Nature stills the mind and awakens the senses*. This ability of lived body experiences to effect these physical changes allowed them to find rest, relaxation, and restoration. This seemed especially important to them as high-functioning, highly academic, self-proclaimed "head" people.

They "live" in their minds and depend on deep thinking for their livelihood. They think theologically most of the time. Not thinking theologically is the exception. So when *all* of them expressed that lived experience of the Spirit in and through Nature quiets the mind and enlivens their senses, well, that is something to pay close attention to. My participants were freed from their normal head-dominance when they gardened, swam in the ocean, prayed in the woods, abided with wild birds. It was more about feeling/sensing the divine, rather than thinking about it. Phrases they used included: "my experience of the Spirit in Nature . . . has to do with the intuitive awareness of and participation in divine reality," "I remember just feeling this *Other* that's there," "more just an experience of being," "the garden is one of the few places where the analytical part of my mind is not activated. . . . And maybe that's one of the reasons that I feel that sense of connectedness there is because I'm not analyzing it so much."

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91. See Chapter 2, Literature Review, for further discussion on corporeality as it relates to both phenomenology and theology.

It seems my participants, like many of us, have a constantly running litany of thought that is rarely still—this is one of the burdens of self, of ego. For some, it can be quite exhausting, leading to anxiety and worry. That seeking out relationship with the Spirit in and through Nature could help one find relief from excessive mind chatter is powerful indeed.

As the mind stills, the sensory nature predominates. Encounters of God in Nature are articulated through the language of the senses, how a moment looked, smelled, sounded, and felt. For my participants, experiences in sacred Nature challenge their thinking by engaging all the senses instead of only the mind, being in the world in a more wholistic way.

It was common to purposefully seek out quiet natural places when they were feeling stressed, drained, unsettled, or burdened by their responsibilities. Other lived experiences seemed more about physically jolting one out of a place of comfort or stagnation, reorienting them in relation to God or motivating them to make important life decisions.

### Lived Time

*Lived time* refers to time as experienced subjectively, not as measured objectively by a clock. Time felt subjectively is how an uninteresting office meeting seems to stretch on, or time with a favorite person is over too quickly. It also refers to, “The temporal

dimensions of past, present, and future . . .”<sup>92</sup> Our temporal experience is influenced by a person’s stage in life and life history (the perspectives, memories and influences that shape a person). Perceptions of past and future are malleable according to the lived time experience of the present.

The emerging theme associated with lived time aspects of my participants’ experiences is *Spending time in Nature is a spiritual practice*. A spiritual practice is an activity that is entered into with the intention of allowing a specific time and place to be with God, to be present to whatever revelation might come. Lived space is also strongly intertwined with this emerging theme, but I will primarily explore it through the lens of lived time.

Meaningful lived time experiences often took place within the context of mundane daily life: commuting, working, tending pets or plants, or going for a walk. Even in my participants’ familiar routines there were arresting surprises that grabbed their full attention (Mark’s great blue heron or Tony’s snow geese experience). In the surprise of these moments, there is a sense of time stopping like a sharp inhalation that is held for a moment.

While a particular experience might be quite surprising (as in not planned), none of them seem shocked by the fact that the Spirit is present for them in those moments. In fact, quite the opposite, my participants actively look for “glimmers” of God that might “splash up” at any moment. Perhaps because of my participants’ pre-understanding that God is in and through Nature, experiencing God in Nature feels normal or natural to

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92. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 104.

them. They exhibited a sense of expectant familiarity or innate intimacy even through lived experiences that took place during special times outside of the mundane daily round (Mark's time in Monteverde, or Darby's vacations at the ocean).

The key to the spiritual practice aspect is in participants actively seeking out time in Nature with the intention of being open to the divine presence there. The spiritual practice might be sitting and breathing with a Catskills stream, a walking meditation in Crum Woods, prayer in the woods of New Jersey, pulling weeds from an Iowa garden, swimming in the ocean off the Outer Banks, walking through the Drew campus from the train station, or watching raptors in the Appalachians. There is a sense of intention, expectation, and openness. There is also a sense of the need to not force any moment to be a divine encounter, lest it feel contrived and inauthentic.

### Lived Relation

The fourth existential, *lived relation*, is the relationality we share with others.<sup>93</sup> This includes all aspects of relationship and all definitions of "other". Experiences of lived relation could, for example, be in relation to an individual person, to a group of people, to other forms of life (pets, wild creatures, plants, ecosystems, the cosmos, etc.), or to the divine. "In a larger existential sense human beings have searched in this experience of the other, the communal, the social for a sense of purpose in life,

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93. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 104.

meaningfulness, grounds for living, as in the religious experience of the absolute Other, God.”<sup>94</sup>

The emerging theme associated with lived relation aspects of my participants’ lived experiences is *Knowing our interrelationship with God and Nature allows humans to more fully know themselves and their place in the world*. This knowing appeared to deepen relationship with God and Nature, and helped participants overcome the challenge of self. It also led to feelings of oneness and interconnection (whether with a particular beloved place in Nature or with all of life on a cosmological scale).

Lived relationship with God and Nature had an affirming affect for my participants in regards to their theological perspectives. There was at times a degree of disparity or perhaps a different dimension of a participant’s way of relating to God versus that of their respective religious denomination or what academia required them to teach. Nature seemed to offer much needed flexibility to relate to God however they needed to, and to leave God free to reveal Godself in ways that would be most meaningful to each person. The latitude of divine expression in Nature helped God be experienced in ways that were very personal without being over and against other expressions. They found this flexibility within the relationship refreshing, nurturing, and crucially important to their spiritual growth.

In relating with God in and through Nature participants were able to transcend the burden of self-absorption. I think it is, perhaps, the ability to find stillness of mind (further discussed in Lived Body) that helped my participants step beyond the self and

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94. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 105.

deepen their relationship with God in and through Nature. Moving beyond fixation on the self, brought my participants to a place of feeling at one and interconnected. Phrases that my participants used to describe this feeling include: “taken up in this bigger thing;” “immersion with the All;” “communion with the universe;” “sense of being connected to the world;” “like being embraced;” “intuitive awareness of and participation in divine reality;” “letting that very beloved and now very known milieu fold in and out of me;” “a very special kind of intimacy;” “it’s a co-mingling, it’s a relationship, it’s something magical...I feel cared for, I feel connected.” Although they might have entered into Nature from a self-absorbed state, consumed with internal mental or emotional processes, the divine was able to reach through and draw them out and into this sacred oneness. This feeling of oneness could be fleeting and transient, or lingering and enduring.

Being intertwined within a larger whole opened my participants more fully to the world. It helped them to better understand their humanness and to understand their world as real and meaningful. My participants expressed that within this abiding in interconnected communion with God in and through Nature, negative emotions were released, needs were met, questions were answered, and positive transformation took place; allowing them to be fully present and aware of their surroundings, to feel more deeply, to relax, to recharge, to heal and grow as people, to put things in their proper perspective. For all of my participants, these lived relation feelings of interconnection lead to an acknowledgement of human responsibility for their impacts on Nature (whether they were acknowledging negative or positive human impacts).

## Implications for Practice

If theology is to succeed in helping inspire others to embrace the healing of Earth as a moral responsibility, then contemporary theologians have a key contribution to make in guiding the Church in this endeavor. This study purports that one way theologians can make this contribution is to incorporate within their work personal narratives of their own lived experiences of the Spirit in and through Nature. Spotlighting the lived experiences of other theologians within their work could also help. Chapter 4 presents copious examples for interested theologians to inspire reflections on their own lived experiences. Also, looking to the emerging themes of this chapter to provide a framework for reflection could be helpful. The below list restates the emerging themes and suggests how they might be framed as questions for personal reflection:

- *Nature can be experienced as sacred space.*  
“What places in Nature have I experienced as sacred space?” “How do those experiences make me feel?”
- *Experiencing God in and through Nature stills the mind and awakens the senses.*  
“How have my experiences of God in Nature affected me physically?” “Do I find stillness of mind or enhanced sensory perception?”
- *Spending time in Nature is a spiritual practice.*  
“When have I experienced time in Nature as spiritual practice?” “How do these experiences enhance my understanding of spiritual practice?”
- *Knowing our interrelationship with God and Nature allows humans to more fully know themselves and their place in the world.*  
“Where do I stand in my relationship with God and Nature?” “How do I experience feelings of interrelationship with God and Nature?” “What does this tell me about myself and my place in the world?”

Given that my research participants were all theologians, along the journey of my study I noticed that the act of their sharing had interesting effects on them. Reflecting upon their lived experiences with me seemed to have a motivating and inspiring influence. For example, Mark found it refreshing, “It’s nice to talk about my work and my identity in this registry. Not so much on the level of, ‘Oh, what’s the biblical support for blah-blah,’ but in terms of my direct encounters with life forms and my meditation and spiritual practices, what that looks like. . . I’ve really enjoyed it.” Darby was inspired with a desire to revisit a work by another theologian and reread it within the context of the ocean stories she had shared with me. Tony found his sharing with me stimulating new thoughts he wanted to explore, particularly around a theology of place. Imagine how if this process inspires the one reflecting on their own stories, how it could also inspire those who experience the shared stories of religious lived experience in and through Nature. There is this potential for positive effects for themselves, for their contributions to a theology that is relevant within the context of a planet in crisis, and for the resulting inspiration their work will have on church leaders and members, and the students they teach.

Theologians incorporating lived experience of the divine in and through Nature into their work holds the potential for the practice of theology, particularly ecotheology, to accomplish the following: 1) Fill in the gap within theological literature of missing religious lived experiences of Nature, particularly those of theologians; 2) Reject the Enlightenment’s dualistic thinking and devaluing of experience, and give contemporary religious lived experience a place at the table of theology along with scripture, tradition,



and reason (See Chapter 2 for more information.); 3) Help the sacred story of Christianity include caring interrelationship with the sacred natural world; 4) Help inspire the church to more fully engage in the work of healing our planet as an act of faith.

Christians reinforce belief and action by telling and retelling the collective Christian story. Caring interrelationship with the sacred Nature must become deeply embedded in the collective Christian story. The rippling effect of tapping in to the undervalued repository of religious lived experience of Nature hopefully would contribute people of faith seeking a deepening of human relationship with Nature and a growing understanding of human interconnectedness with Nature.

Experiencing relationship with the Spirit in and through Nature, and feeling interconnected with Nature, has the potential to lead to empathy. Empathy is described by environmental psychologist Louise Chawla as what happens, “when boundaries between the self and another thing dissolve in an intense act of perception.”<sup>95</sup> Empathy can feed feelings of caring responsibility and therein lies the seeds of the desire to restore the health of Nature wherever possible.

As evidence to support the potential of religious lived experience in and through Nature to foster feelings of empathy, let us look at excerpts from my research of my participants making the leap from empathy to acknowledging the need for action on Nature’s behalf. Catherine, when discussing her cosmology of folds and the “infinite that

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95. Louise Chawla, *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry, and Childhood Memory* (State University of New York Press, 1994), 188.

enfolds all things” and is “unfolding itself in all things,” referred to the climate crisis as “our turning folds into tears.” Mark described it as forcing God into the shadows:

. . . as we make war against the earth, as we degrade our natural home, we live in a time of God’s absence. We live in a time of God going into eclipse; we live in a time of the shadow God. And it’s not that God isn’t real and alive and present, but we force God into the shadows when we continue to despoil and degrade.

Darby explains it as dissatisfaction with the way things are versus how the world should be:

Those experiences of immersion in the All, of salty communion (union with) with the universe, give me a taste of the world as it should be—of the kinship that is the most fundamental truth of Creation. In so doing, those experiences fuel a kind of holy dissatisfaction with the way things are; a deep desire to do away with the myriad obstacles to planetary flourishing. So the ocean “retreat” is not so much a respite from the real world as a tiny taste of its possible transformation—a taste that makes me hungry for precisely that transformation and that sends me back into my familiar “landlubbing” world with fresh conviction and courage for the justice work at hand.

Tony affirmed theology’s role in environmental thought because humans are part of the environment:

I think it’s very important that theology have something to say about the natural world and the environment, because we’re linked – we *are* a part of the environment. And so to harm it is to harm ourselves. There are a lot of ethical implications for all this. . . .that’s part of this sense of connection that developed in me over years of spending lots of time in the woods and water.

And, Priscilla described her exploration and critique of the Christian concept of stewardship as lacking inspiration and/or response to ecological care: “My ecological theological work is actually offering a different lens than stewardship for the way Christians ought to relate to the natural world. . . . Look around us, we’ve got the

stewardship language and all these ideas and it doesn't work in that we're not taking very good care of things.”

The power of lived experience can inspire people to seek out and share their own lived experiences of the Spirit in and through the natural world. Through the exploration of their lived experiences they may discover deeper connections with the divine and Nature that may inspire them to seek to restore, protect and preserve Nature for its intrinsic value, for its ability to support continued human existence within the larger web of abundant and diverse life, and for its ability to reveal an indwelling God. The power of lived experience can help us understand the imperative to become a passionate advocate for healing Nature through our particular theological and spiritual journey. The power of lived experience of the Spirit in and through the natural world can inspire and launch us deeper into the work of healing our planet as an act of faith and an ecological spiritual practice.<sup>96</sup>

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96. See Appendix E for a resource on applications for congregational leaders and members.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The search for a more adequate conceptualization of nature and of our own humanity must, I am convinced, begin with a radical seeing, encountering the cosmos and ourselves within it in the full richness of meaningful experience. . . . The authentic relation between beings is the personal encounter of mutual respect, with its cognitive counterpart of a quest for empathic understanding and its ethical presumption of a fundamental order of a moral law rather than of individual or collective utility.

—Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*

#### Get Out There: An Interdisciplinary Admonition

My study set out to discover how five Christian theologians experienced the Spirit in Nature. What I found through the interviews were rich and inspiring accounts that came from both the intentional and the spontaneous. Some of my participants' lived experiences were characterized by particular and familiar places that were part of their daily or weekly routines, while others took place during special trips away from the familiar. But even the special trips are part of the foundational starting point of any phenomenological study, "the empirical realm of everyday lived experience."<sup>97</sup>

Kohák's emphasis, seen in the above epigraph, on the importance of encounter has certainly been borne out in my research results, and his thoughts are also shared by numerous voices across disciplines. For example, Gary Snyder pointed out, "there are two basic modes of learning: 'direct experience' and 'hearsay.' Nowadays most that we know comes through hearsay—through books, teachers, and television—keyed to only a

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97. Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, ix.

minimal ground of direct contact with the world.”<sup>98</sup> Further, Snyder described intentional living in relationship with Nature as a “civilization of wildness. . . . The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home.”<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, Sallie McFague called for an embodied “in-touch model” of human existence with Nature: “An in-touch model insists that fundamentally we are embodied subjects on a continuum with many other different kinds of embodied subjects, all of which live together in relations of mutual response.”<sup>100</sup> McFague’s metaphoric “loving eye” provides us a means for how humans are to cultivate an intersubjective relationship with Nature. For her “the loving eye” comes through a reciprocal sense of touching and being touched by Nature; giving us a sense of self that is “profoundly embodied, relational, responsive beings, as created to love others, not to control them.”<sup>101</sup>

The phenomenological philosopher Kohák, the environmental writer Snyder, and the theologian McFague are all encouraging us to seek out our own daily lived experiences with the natural world and the divine. Call it radical seeing, the loving eye, or the civilization of wildness for they all are, like me, offering the same admonishment: to discover and experience a more authentic, respectful, empathic, and ethical way of being in interrelationship with Nature. The challenge is to become fully aware of our

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98. Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space* (New York: Counterpoint, 1995), 94.

99. Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 25, 24.

100. McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 118-119.

101. *Ibid.*, 92.

world and the life-giving relationships we share. We are inspired to open wide our minds, spirits, and bodies; emptying ourselves of an obsessively human-centric worldview. We are called to move in and through the porousness of Nature; fully living in profound relational mutuality, compassion, and ecological wholeness. Seeking out regular encounters of our world with intention, we open ourselves to being awed, surprised, embraced, comforted, disturbed, loved, and transformed.

Our lived experience of God in Nature is paramount to an ecological and spiritual transformation. And, as suggested in this study, encountering the lived experiences of others through shared story is also a powerful way of transforming how we relate to God in Nature. In the context of this study, we have “heard the stories” of five Christian theologians and discovered some understanding of what it is like to encounter God in Nature.

### Summary of the Study

The initial step in my research was an interview with each participant where I asked the question, “How do you experience God (or the Spirit) in Nature?” After interviewing my participants, I reflected upon the transcribed texts of their lived experiences looking for what the experiences were expressing. Then, through my interpretation, I described for each participant what themes were revealed, explored those themes, and crafted a brief overall statement encapsulating what their experiences point toward.

Experiencing the richness of my participants' lived experiences was at the same time captivating, humbling, and reassuring. Their stories are very different from each other's and from my own; and, at the same time, they are also quite similar. The particularities of personality, circumstance, time and place are the differentiation. But, when I pulled back to a broader view, the differences began to melt away and what I discovered were meaningful emerging themes.

In Chapter 2: Literature Review I explored six dominant themes of an existential-hermeneutical phenomenology of religion as described by Twiss and Conser.<sup>102</sup> These existential themes are woven as a phenomenological tapestry of human experience and understanding. And, in Chapter 3, I outlined the design and methods of my research.

The core of my study was in Chapter 4, with the results narrative, thematic analysis. Chapter 4 ends in a summary which presents the four encompassing themes I called essential concepts, and a brief foray into their implications for the religious environmental movement. Finally in Chapter 5, I further synthesized the research into broad applications and implications for the practice of theology.

While the journey of my research and the creation of this manuscript have been enlightening and immensely satisfying, I have questions that remain unanswered. Therefore, the next section presents suggestions for further research.

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102. Twiss and Conser, *Experience of the Sacred*, 46.

## Suggestions for Further Research

Hermeneutic phenomenology takes an enormous amount of time and energy to accomplish, especially for one lone researcher; therefore, my sample size was necessarily small at five participants. One of the questions I have is: would the overarching themes that emerged from my study continue to hold up as similar studies eventually create a larger body of data for comparison? There is simply not enough research of this type out there. Therefore, I encourage phenomenological researchers to continue investigating lived experience of God in Nature. And, remember, there is already a good amount of exploration around the nature and philosophy of religious lived experience. What is needed are many more studies that look at actual lived experiences, capturing real-life anecdotes of encountering God in Nature.

There are infinite directions one could take to continue this research. My group of participants was somewhat racially and culturally homogenous. They were all white, all middle class, all from the United States, and all formally trained in mainline Protestant theologies. I was very pleased to have a strong female voice among my participants, particularly as the world of theologians is traditionally male dominated. But, the question remains: how would the lived experiences of African Americans or Hispanics or an indigenous cultural group or theologians from another country differ from or resemble those of my sample group? What about groups with markedly different theologies from my participants—how would the same study look with a Roman Catholic sample, or an Eastern Orthodox sample? What about samples of other religions including monotheistic and polytheistic groups?



Another category of my wonderment emerges out of considering how important the sense of sight was in my participants' lived experiences. Again and again I listened to vivid descriptions of visual beauty, of color and form. What about a blind person? The audible song of Nature was also strong in my data. What about a deaf person? A whole series of studies could emerge from the question: How would people with physical disabilities experience God in Nature?

The concept of lived experiences of God in and through Nature that had an element of danger was touched upon in my research. This could be an interesting focus area for further study. Assuming groups of extreme sports enthusiasts who believe in God could be found, they would be an interesting sample group.

This type of research is subjective. There is no point to prove or disprove as in quantitative research. And yet, in my moments of bumbling and doubting, I have wondered if there is a way to prove the power of story, to structure research that captures the actual impact the shared lived experience has on the recipient. Does sharing our stories really change anything? If so, how? How exactly would hearing a theologian share a personal story of encountering God in Nature affect the listener? Perhaps this is unnecessary, as the power of a story shared is proved again and again with each repetition, with each new book published, with each generation repeating the orally passed wisdom of the ancients.

## Closing Thoughts

Collectively these five Christian theologians' lived experiences of the Spirit in Nature help us discover more fully what it means to radically see with a loving eye, discovering essential understandings about our world and our humanness in relationship with God. And it's important for understanding why we must live with intention and awareness right where we are—*being* home and telling a good story.

I hope theologians and people of faith will begin speaking more openly about human relationship with God in Nature, encouraging others to deepen their relationship with God through Nature, transforming the church from the inside out into a passionate and engaged advocate for our planetary health. For healing Nature will not only ensure the survival of our own species and many other species, but will also deepen our relationship with God. Hopefully my study and suggestions for further research will inspire further exploration into how theologians and all people of faith experience the Spirit in Nature.

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## APPENDIXES

### *Appendix A: Letter to Participants*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: Ecological Theology Doctoral Research Study

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Brad Martell and I'm an Environmental Studies doctoral student at Antioch University New England, Keene, NH. (Insert one or two lines here to personalize the email. For example: 1) I have met personally and/or share mutual acquaintances with a number of my potential participants, and 2) a number of the theologians have greatly influenced my own theological development over the years.)

My dissertation research explores the question: *How do Christian theologians experience the Spirit in the natural world?* I am focusing on Christian theologians who are in the forefront of developing ecological theology/pneumatology. My research seeks to capture how these theologians have experienced for themselves God/the Spirit/the Divine in the natural world. And whether/how such experiences have contributed to their ecotheological formation.

As a prominent theologian in ecological theology, would you be willing and available (before the end of this year, 2010) to be a participant for my doctoral research? I would like to schedule and conduct an in-person interview with you at your convenience. The interview would be approximately ninety (90) minutes in length and electronically recorded for later transcription. In the interview I will ask you to talk about some of your personal experiences of when and if you have encountered the Spirit's presence in nature. It is my hope that through the process of interviewing you and other Christian theologians we will broaden the understanding of human religious experience of the natural world.

In addition to your consideration of being a participant for my study, are there other theologians you would recommend I contact?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Grace and Peace,  
Brad

Brad A. Martell  
Doctoral Candidate  
Environmental Studies  
Antioch University New England, Keene, NH

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Cell phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
bmartell@antioch.edu



*Appendix B: Participant Release Agreement*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you, again, for your interest and willingness to be a participant for my doctoral dissertation research. The purpose of this letter is to further inform you about the nature of my study and to gather your written permission to use the information discussed in our interview and follow up communications.

**Research Project**

*How Christian Theologians Experience the Spirit in Nature: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study*

**Purpose of my research**

The purpose of this study is to explore religious experience and how the divine is revealed in nature by using philosophical and methodological principles of hermeneutic phenomenology. This study seeks to describe and elucidate Christian theologians' lived experience of the Spirit in Nature. Experiences of Spirit in Nature will be generally defined as a sense of the sacredness of all life and its reflection of the divine.

**What we will discuss during the interview**

I am asking you to participate in an approximately ninety (90) minute length, electronically recorded, in person interview to talk about your personal experiences of the Spirit in Nature and your work in ecological theology/pneumatology. Through the process of interviewing you and other Christian theologians I hope to gain insight into the meaning of human religious experience of the natural world. Specifically, how Christian theologians, who are in the forefront of constructing ecological theologies of the Spirit, experience the Spirit in Nature.

**Benefits to you and others**

I believe my research will illuminate aspects of human experience for further theological insights into the relationship of God, humans, and Nature. Exploring religious experience in how Christian theologians come to construct ecological theologies/pneumatologies affirms the importance of experience in human life; how religious experience comes to shape our worldviews and beliefs. By your participation in this study your ecotheological experience and work will have further opportunities to be shared with others. As a study on religious experience the audiences for this study include but are not limited to: 1) professional/academic Christian theologians engaged in the development of ecological theology; 2) students of Christian theology; 3) people of faith, especially Christians; and 4) phenomenologists interested in studies of human religious experience and/or human experience with Nature. The results of my research may be used after initial publication

of my dissertation for the writing of academic articles, curriculum development, and other publications.

### **Request to use your name in my research publications**

In view of the historical and scholarly value of your theological work and personal story, as may be revealed from the interview, I would like permission to use your name in my dissertation and any subsequent publications related to my research. After I have completed transcription of the interview, I will mail you a copy along with any initial interpretations that I may make. This will provide you an opportunity to read, edit, and approve the information in your transcribed interview and comment upon my initial interpretations. I will provide you with a self-addressed and postage paid return envelope so you may send me your edits and comments. Or, if you prefer, this process can be done via electronic means (i.e., email or fax). In the case that I need further clarification about anything you said during the interview, I may contact you either by phone or email with follow up questions.

### **Possible risks and rights as a participant associated with this study**

The foreseeable risks to you associated with this research are: 1) it may reveal personal information about your work and personal life to the public, and 2) through the course of the interviews we may discuss topics that evoke an emotional reaction. Regarding the first point, excerpts from our interview may be incorporated into public documents such as my doctoral dissertation, journal articles, and/or books, etc. In addition, your identity and place of employment will be divulged. Regarding the second point, you are free to not respond to any questions you feel are sensitive and/or problematic. You are free to ask me any questions and I will respond openly and honestly. Your participation is strictly voluntary and no compensation will be provided. Additionally, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time via verbal or written communication.

### **Research Consent**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (*please print*), in view of the historical and scholarly value contained in the interviews with researcher Brad A. Martell knowingly and voluntarily permit Brad A. Martell the full use of this information (including electronic recordings and transcriptions and all other materials in this accession), I hereby grant and assign to Brad A. Martell all rights pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are known, recognized or contemplated.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Research Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Brad A. Martell, at telephone # (xxx) xxx-xxxx, ext. xxxx or cell phone # (xxx) xxx-xxxx or via email at [bmartell@antioch.edu](mailto:bmartell@antioch.edu).**

**If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact \_\_\_\_\_, Chair of the Antioch University New England Human Research Committee, (xxx) xxx-xxxx, or via email at \_\_\_\_\_. Or, \_\_\_\_\_, ANE Vice President for Academic Affairs, (xxx) xxx-xxxx, or via email at \_\_\_\_\_.**

To the best of my knowledge, the information above is complete and accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Signature of Researcher Brad A. Martell)

(Date

*Appendix C: Follow-Up Letter to Participants*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thanks again for being willing to participate in my dissertation research.

Attached you will find a verbatim transcript of the interview.

As part of the validity or trustworthiness of my findings/interpretations of the interviews, I'm asking each interview participant to provide feedback at my initial stage of analysis. This research process is called "member-checking". Basically, you as co-researcher have the opportunity to read through your interview to verify, correct, and add to your responses. Also, it is an opportunity for us to have some dialog on the interpretation of your experience. The member-checking process provides for greater clarity of your responses and subsequent interpretations of meaning.

What I'm finding is that the **OVERALL THEME** of your interview is:

\_\_\_\_\_.

**SUMMARY OF THEME:**

I ask for your comments, questions, clarifications, etc. regarding the overall theme I'm finding. I want to make sure you feel I'm going in the right direction and representing your experiences correctly.

- Any additions or corrections to your experiences from the interview?
- Any additional experiences you would like to share?
- Anything in the interview you would prefer I do not share in my final dissertation?

If it would be easier, I would be happy to call you for a short phone interview for these follow-up questions. If so, would there be a good time in the next couple weeks for a phone call? Your interview was wonderful. Again, thanks so much, \_\_\_\_\_. Look forward to hearing from you.

All the best,  
Brad

Ps. It's easiest to reach me by Cell: (xxx) xxx-xxxx and/or email: bmartell@antioch.edu

*Appendix D: Interview Guide*

**Interview Questions, Prompts, Probes:**

- 1) Describe where you have felt very connected spiritually to a particular time and place in and with the natural world.
- 2) Describe to me in as much detail as possible what the place and time were like?
- 3) What others (animals, humans, plants) did you encounter?
- 4) How did that place and time make you feel?
- 5) What did you do in that place?
- 6) What else happened?
- 7) In your book \_\_\_\_\_ you tell a story about your childhood or another child \_\_\_\_\_ where you or that child felt connect (i.e., physically, spiritually, emotionally) to that place. Can you recall another similar experience for yourself?
- 8) What was it like? (refer back to #2-6)
- 9) You teach at \_\_\_\_\_ University. Is there an outdoor place on campus that is a special place for you?
- 10) What is it like? (refer back to #2-6)
- 11) Describe why is it a special place?
- 12) What do you see, hear, or touch, for example in that place?
- 13) What do you do in that place?
- 14) You mentioned (doing, being) \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e., spiritual practice, physical activity, just being present) in that place. Tell me more about that.
- 15) Describe what is it like for you to be \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e., praying, running, walking, teaching class) in that place?
- 16) How does that time and place contribute to your experience of the divine?
- 17) Describe where or what is God/the Spirit/the divine for you in that place and time?

18) Describe how that place contributes to your experiencing God/the Spirit/the divine?

19) Describe how that place makes you feel.

20) Is there anything else you would like to share or describe about one of your experiences? Or, is there a new experience you remember?

## *Appendix E: Applications for Congregational Leaders and Members*

Congregational leaders, whether they be professional clergy or lay ministers, have an opportunity to guide the members of their congregations to a place of greater relationship with and advocacy on behalf of sacred Nature. Some might need to start at square one: God created Nature; Nature is good; hurting Nature is bad; on Sunday after church there will be a Nature walk and meditation by a waterfall; we'll reflect upon our experience next week in Sunday school. Other congregations will have already achieved a base of knowledge, experience, and relationship which leaders can take to the next level: Several weeks of class discussions based on the Renewal video series; congregational reflection about how they feel specifically called to act on behalf of Nature; engagement in an action to fulfill that call (i.e., contacting members of Congress, adopting a local stream to cleanup, funding solar panels for the church roof, etc.).<sup>103</sup>

There are endless opportunities in which to facilitate greater focus on the sacred natural world, and on environmental advocacy. Small group discussions, book clubs, Nature outings, sermons, Sunday school classes, and so on. Congregations may find empowerment in first looking at whether their church buildings and practices are a part of the solution or the problem for Nature. Leaders should reinforce the scriptural context of relationship with God in Nature, and highlight any justification or support for environmental action that might already exist in your faith movement.

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103. *Renewal: Stories from America's Religious-Environmental Movement*, produced and directed by Marty Ostrow and Terry Kay Rockefeller, Fine Cut Productions, LLC, 2007.

There are already some good resources on the market that can be used as study guides or discussion starters. A few that come to mind are Belden C. Lane's *Backpacking with the Saints*; Steven Chase's *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, and its partner book, *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice*; Mark I. Wallace's *Green Christianity*; Sallie McFague's *Super, Natural Christians*; and Douglas E. Christie's *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*.<sup>104</sup>

Many congregations go on weekend retreats or weeklong together, often in a Nature setting. There is usually a particular theme that guides their time together. Here are a few themes to build a structure around: "Reading and Writing the Divine in Nature," "Sacredness of Creation," "Nature as Spiritual Practice," "Creation Groans: We Respond."

My advice to congregation leaders is to get their members out in the natural world as often as possible, help them reflect on and identify the divine in those moments, and reinforce the need to help heal the earth in whatever ways one feels most passionate. And, if it is appropriate for your group, have the courage to advocate politically together. Look for ways to overcome the divisiveness of partisanship by focusing on issues that can be agreed upon. Help your members understand the importance of changing the governing structures that keep the destructive status quo in place. For example, using

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104. Belden C. Lane's *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015); Steven Chase's *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011); *ibid.*, *A Field Guide to Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011); Mark I. Wallace's *Green Christianity*; Sallie McFague's *Super, Natural Christians*; and Douglas E. Christie's *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind*.



energy efficient lightbulbs in the church is one level of commitment, but asking politicians to replace the local dirty coal plant with cleaner energy is another.

There are groups that can be a resource for congregations such as Creation Justice Ministries, [www.creationjustice.org](http://www.creationjustice.org); Green Faith Interfaith Partnership for the Environment, [www.greenfaith.org](http://www.greenfaith.org); and Interfaith Power and Light A Religious Response to Global Warming, [www.interfaithpowerandlight.org](http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org).

Actions can be classified into the following categories to ponder depending on where a person is at in their relationship with Nature: seeking to find or deepen a relationship with God in Nature, deepening their base of knowledge about environmental issues, being an advocate within the congregation or larger community or the broader political-civic realm.

Many of the above suggestions for congregational leaders also apply for individuals. Here are some additional suggestions under each category:

#### Deepen relationship with God in Nature

- Start weekly meditative Nature walks and journal about them
- Do the above with a small group of friends from your church
- Learn the names of the birds around your home using a bird field guide; then look for bird imagery when you read scripture
- Go to a nearby natural place to pray, developing Nature as a spiritual practice
- Read books written by spiritually-oriented Nature writers such as: John Muir, Terry Tempest Williams, Annie Dillard, David James Duncan, Wendell Berry, Barbara Kingsolver, Gary Snyder

- Lead a “God in Nature” book club exploring favorites from your reading

Deepening knowledge base about Nature and environmental issues

- What guiding principles and inspiration lies within your faith tradition regarding ecological justice, environmental ethics, and caring for Nature?
- Investigate what might be happening in your local community that threatens the health of your special natural place
- Seek information sources outside of the context of mainstream media

Advocate within congregation, community, or the broader political-civic realm

- Take a look at the “offering of letters” approach of the successful non-governmental organization Bread for the World. Meet with congregational leaders to explore modeling that in your congregation around a local or national environmental issue.
- Join an environmental organization as an act of faith.
- Write your congressional members as a person of faith concerned about a specific environmental issue (i.e., clean energy, land use, clean air and water, agriculture).