

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-22-2021

How Nature Calls in a More Secure Sense of Self in the Face of Perfectionism: An Expressive Arts Therapy Journey to Self-Identity

Marissa Aldieri
maldier2@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aldieri, Marissa, "How Nature Calls in a More Secure Sense of Self in the Face of Perfectionism: An Expressive Arts Therapy Journey to Self-Identity" (2021). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 461. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/461

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

PERFECTIONISM, NATURE, AND SELF

**How Nature Calls in a More Secure Sense of Self in the Face of Perfectionism: An
Expressive Arts Therapy Journey to Self-Identity**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2021

Marissa Aldieri

Expressive Arts Therapy

Dr. Ara Parker, DMin, MA (ET), RCAT, RP, CCC

Abstract

This thesis explores the relational dimensions of perfectionism, expressive arts therapy (ExAT), and the more-than-human natural world as these components influence the development and maintenance of the “sense of self.” This term refers to a perception of the “self” as a set of traits and beliefs that shape an individual’s perceived purpose in the world, often heavily influenced by external societal pressures at a young age. “I’m not good enough” often rings in the ears of educators, parents, coaches, expressive arts therapists, and other mental health workers as the fear of vulnerability, judgment, and failure inhibits creative impulse and intuitive identity. The query began with how expressive arts therapy can aid in managing perfectionism and whether using nature as a co-therapist could facilitate and deepen interpersonal connections. This paper reviews literature on nature-based therapies and examines the author’s own experience working with nature as a third entity in the therapeutic relationship through an autoethnographic arts-based research approach. Findings advocate that nature informed ExAT can invite the innermost authentic self into a therapeutic conversation, give it space for healing, and aid in combating perfectionistic tendencies.

Keywords: nature-based therapy, expressive arts therapy, mental health counseling, perfectionism, literature review

How Nature Calls in a More Secure Sense of Self in the Face of Perfectionism: An Expressive Arts Therapy Journey to Self-Identity

Though there are numerous articles focusing on the relationship between perfectionism in performing arts, perfectionism as a behavior in response to therapeutic artmaking has not yet been addressed in expressive arts therapies scholarship. Perfectionism is considered to be an important personality characteristic in sport and performing arts because high levels of dedication is essential and near perfect performance is necessary to be successful in these areas (Hill et al., 2015). Societal expectations have taught us that sport and art performance must aim for the highest levels of achievement to be considered worthwhile as a career or long-term interest. Though competition may influence internal motivation to aim for greater capacity of what the body and mind can do, it could very well also be driving talented artists toward interpersonal difficulties and eventually out of practice. Overlapping themes like the need for accomplishment to reach potential, strain of flawlessness, and unwavering commitment to improving performance can also be identified in ExAT and, in turn, disrupt the varying degree of therapeutic opportunities.

Therapy is often associated with pain and suffering. When confronted with pain or discomfort, one feels the need to get to the bottom of things immediately, find the answer to the “why?” and quickly work toward a solution. Throughout this writing process, I recognized themes which led me to articles focused on ecopsychology, ExAT, and perfectionism. The worldwide pandemic in response to COVID-19 that has overtaken the lives of many has also led me to deeper self-exploration. My main interest here is to explore literature on the above concepts more in depth, reflect on the content, and investigate the similar themes that emerged in some of my own processing along the way. This literature review will add insight on the topic of

addressing perfectionism in ExAT, which is a noticeable gap in this field of research. My exploration examines how nature calls in a more secure sense of self in individuals who doubt their competency in the arts and inner self. In other words, I believe nature can invite and aid in acknowledging the inner, most authentic self and give it space for expression without holding it to an immediate expectation.

The significance of this topic lies in concern of the national mental health crisis following the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that will yield serious health and social consequences for years to come. There are a variety of external factors that negatively affect stress levels, from economic downturns and environmental crises to the impact of racism and political polarization. We have suffered through more than a year in social isolation, over 530,000 U.S. citizens dead, millions unemployed, children out of school. This pandemic has caused a burn-out epidemic that World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD) recently recognized as a medical syndrome characterized by energy depletion, reduced professional efficacy, and detachment from work (World Health Organization, 2019). Burn-out results from a chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Striving for perfection or having responsibilities with little to no room for mistake can be highly demanding and easily trigger burn-out or mental breaking points. By merely recognizing perfectionistic tendencies and learning how to combat perfectionism-induced burn-out could strongly impact many individuals who experience said symptoms.

This literature review is a multidisciplinary approach as I explore research from within and beyond many mental health disciplines. I congregate insight from a plethora of avenues in psychology and use those perspectives to inform my work and broaden my point of view. I survey literature about perfectionism, ExAT, and ecopsychology among a variety of populations,

international geographic locations, and psychological perspectives. In my autoethnography section, I will introduce my own expressive arts therapy journey to self-identity and use this experience as a pathfinder for further empirical research.

Literature Review

Psychological Framework

The aim of this research is to better understand how nature aids in the promotion of resilience in addressing perfectionism. It starts with learning when perfectionistic tendencies begin to manifest and why. The answers dwell in both preliminary and contemporary research in developmental psychology, transpersonal psychology, attachment theory, and psychodynamic theory. This literature review will cover the relationship between perfectionism, ExAT, and ecopsychology and investigate the benefits of implementing the use of nature as a third entity in the therapeutic relationship. Exploring literature linked to the sense of self builds a fundamental piece of this puzzle as it is the main constituent that relates all three segments highlighted in this review. How do they compare and contrast as a triad? How can I fill the gaps between what is and is not studied in the field to set up an opportunity for further exploration? How can nature serve as a co-therapist when inviting in a more secure sense of self? In my review, I will also be looking at ways to implement nature as a co-therapist and I have reviewed literature in areas which include Forest Bathing (FB), slow travel, and narrative play in nature.

Perfectionism

The tendency to associate the quality of presentation with aesthetics and perfection disrupts the pure and authentic therapeutic process that defines expressive arts therapies. Studies have shown that ExAT is most effective when the *process* of creating art is valued over the final *product*. Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality characteristic with healthy and

unhealthy components (Ganske et al., 2015). Often, perfectionism is misunderstood as a positive trait rather than a setback because people will justify it as the reason that they stay motivated and driven. Perfectionists convince themselves that success is black and white, standards are fixed, and anything less than complete is a failure. Brené Brown (2010) argues that perfectionism is not on the same end of the spectrum as striving to be your best. "It's a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it's the thing that's really preventing us from flight" (p. 56). Constantly striving for high quality can produce chronic and addictive tendencies that interfere with a healthy self-identity.

How does one really come to know their ego? A large portion of who we are is shaped in our key developmental stages, while the other parts of our identities develop beyond these stages into a reformed sense of self. The structuring of a healthy self-identity begins at birth, starting with the connection to our birth mother. Donald Winnicott's view of human development exists in the belief that development does not sit solely on internal structure, but rather "the interaction of the baby's innate qualities and the quality and consistency of maternal care provided" (Borg, 2013, p. 8). In his concepts on the mother/child pair, Winnicott introduced the "good enough mother" as someone who makes an active adaptation to an infant's needs that gradually lessens over time. With the pressure of ensuring mother meets child's needs, Winnicott stresses the term *good enough* to "account for the reality that an ideal mother, while aspirational, does not exist" (as cited in Kreshak, 2020, p. 5). It is the imperfection of human care that Winnicott valued as essential in providing balance, which satisfies the child and forces them towards independence (Borg, 2013). Winnicott affirms that "In order to be consistent, and so to be predictable for our children, we must be ourselves" (Winnicott, 2002, p. 179). Winnicott emphasized the power of imperfection as a core belief in psychological development. That begs the question, at what point

does "good enough" transform into "not enough"? Perhaps it is the relationship an individual has with their ego that requires additional attention.

Winnicott (1960) expounded on the idea that people develop an idealized *false self* to protect their authentic and vulnerable *true self*, stemming from notions of the ego. Without consciously noticing it, a child will adjust their spontaneous behavior (true self) to the response of caregivers when needs do not sufficiently get met. While imperfection is a healthy step toward independence, compliance to the environment is the child's attempt to protect themselves from further inadequacy. It is the covering up of the original true self that results in the birth of the false self. The true and false self is explained in greater detail in following sections on the development of self in the context of perfectionism. Though a false self is not developed consciously, a great way to untangle your false self from your true self and regain confidence in your honest expressions is to search for validation in yourself rather than in other people. Comparative behaviors need to be tackled as we become more aware of our self-identity so to build a reformed sense of self. Transformation dwells in intentional emotional bonds.

Winnicott demonstrated that interpersonal relationships are among the most significant aspects of shaping a person's story into a one-of-a-kind. John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst specializing in attachment theory, noted, "Many of the most intense of all human emotions arise during the formulation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of affectional bonds" (Bowlby, 1979, as cited in Borg, 2013, p. 40). While relationships are a large part of forming our sense of self, they can equally aid in what helps us change it. Relational support is especially significant in the relationship one has with the inner, most authentic, and improvised identity.

Expressive Arts Therapy

Expressive arts therapy is a diversified means of healing. Trained therapists invite visual mediums, dramatic play, musical improvisation, authentic movement, free-formed writing, and many more organic expressions into the therapeutic alliance. Karen Estrella accurately outlines the ExAT by saying, "The arts are uniquely beneficial in their capacity to access experience, thoughts, and feelings that do not depend exclusively on either verbal language or narrative discourse" (as cited in Malchiodi, 2005, pp. 187). In all individual art modalities, there is the interconnectedness of forms acted on through the subconscious. Paolo Knill's Intermodal Theory rests on the act of shifting from one art form to another (intermodal transfer) or layering forms to coexist in the same avenue of processing (superimposition) (Knill et al., 2004). Additional stimuli from other modalities enhance the clients' experience and drive them deeper into the imaginative realm. An intermodal approach to therapy can open up the opportunity of choice and at the same time leave room to challenge vulnerabilities and competencies.

Pioneers in the field of ExAT focused many of their writings on transpersonal aspects such as spontaneity, heightened sensitivity to inner states, deep connectivity to self and others, and awareness of energetic and embodied shifts in consciousness (Kossak, 2009). These aspects are similar to those lacking in a perfectionistic mindset as individuals will seek a rigid structure, doubt their actions, find difficulty trusting others, and so on. Kossak (2009) explores the concept of attunement in ExAT and artistic expression and reveals that therapeutic attunement involves a transpersonal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal connection. Whether it is the connection to our environment, our embodied reaction, or witness, Kossak (2009) acknowledges that "tuning into the moment creates an opportunity for the clear articulation of creative impulses to emerge and the possibility of achieving a therapeutic attunement" (p. 17). Following one's most genuine

creative impulses opens new doors into the unconscious experience and repressed material that one's mind stores in a holding place. The search for a trustworthy therapeutic container keeps one's conscious mind from allowing this bottled-up material to emerge.

The relationship to a good enough therapeutic space is equally important to the good enough mother/child relationship. Nordin-Bates (2020) investigated the relationship between creativity and perfectionism in ballet dancers at an academy in Sweden. They found that teachers who support basic psychological needs support dancers' creativity and likely aid in perfectionism management. Support can be achieved by creating a safe space where individuals feel free to explore, having treatment remain person-centered, and building opportunities to work collaboratively. ExAT allows for such an opportunity. According to Moskowitz-Corrois (2018, as cited in Kreshak, 2020), therapeutic space is "designed and created with intention and purpose... [and] supports the wellbeing of those utilizing the space" (p. 6). Kreshak (2020) adds, "in a good-enough therapeutic space, this intention and purpose serve therapeutic goals that support the psychosocial wellbeing of the clients" (p. 6). There is no better non-judgmental and authentic therapeutic container than that of a pure nonhuman natural environment.

The mind, body, and spirit in relation to nature are just as interconnected as the artistic modalities in creative expression. Kossak (2009) notes, "The arts act as a vehicle for universal truths to be expressed." The truth remains in the intention and attunement to the creative impulse. Perhaps appropriate intentions are the reason nature combined with the arts aids so well in securing a stronger sense of authentic self. Applying ExAT while utilizing nature as a co-therapist can offer intention, provide safety and security, stimulate attunement, and activate the creative imagination. Though ecotherapy in relation to ExAT is still a young and developing discipline, there are numerous therapeutic benefits already observed in qualitative and

quantitative research. These themes get explored at greater length in the following sections. I will introduce one final framework in ecopsychology before moving forward to the exploration of such research.

Ecopsychology and Ecotherapy

Ecotherapy, otherwise known as nature therapy, is the applied practice of the young and developing discipline of ecopsychology. In the simplest terms, "ecopsychology brings psychology and ecology together to study the human psyche within the larger systems of which it is a part" (Conn, 1998, p. 180). Harold Searles (1960, as cited in Naor & Maysseless, 2020) argued that nature is considered "one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence" (p. 115). In the words of one of its most acknowledged representatives, cultural historian Theodore Roznak, ecopsychology longs to challenge the limits of the saying "the soul might be saved while the biosphere crumbles" and expand the inherent emotional bonds between person and planet via a more intimate connection with it (as cited in Fisher, 2013, p. 4). Freud's psychodynamic theory of human functioning explores the psychological forces that underlie human behavior, feelings, and emotions and how they might relate to early experience. Searles pointed out a gap in his book on the nonhuman environment, proposing that Freud failed to explicitly acknowledge the significance of the nonhuman environment in the development of human psychological life (Jordan, 2009). To understand our psyche at greater length, we must have a universal understanding that there is no emergence of self without nature. This literature review will not only explore the development of self but, more importantly, a version of self as it connects with the more-than-human natural world.

For the Aboriginal Australians, land and self did not develop as separate entities; early ancestors were deemed to be in an interdependent relationship from infancy. The more-than-

human world was incorporated as a part of an ecological self (Jordan, 2009). According to Burns (2012), the ecological self is an identity that arises when one is in a dynamic relationship with another and feels a sense of identification with that other. Not all humans fall into the category of having an ambivalent relationship with nature. We can gather evidence of reciprocal relationality as early as indigenous Civilization. Indigenous culture is intrinsically linked to land, who praised and respected it 40,000 years before colonization by European settlers. Descendants of early natives continue to teach us the significance of a healthy attachment to metaphysical landscape and fight to gain back rights to preserve its sacredness. Through these experiences in nature, one gains an experiential knowledge of how we are connected with nature and the bigger world (see Journal Entry 8 in Appendix A). A subject from the Noar & Mayseless (2020) study describes her experience in nature-based therapy, "By connecting with a semantic emotional, spiritual aspect of ourselves, and connecting with other people and the natural world, we have some sense of how we are part of the bigger web" (p. 124). Ecopsychology aims to explore and expand the emotional, physical, and spiritual connection between humans and nature, treating people psychologically by bringing them closer to nature.

Ideologies as wide-scoped as ecopsychology offer various vital avenues that relate closely to the mind-body-spirit connection recognized in the expressive arts. Nature's pure healing provides us with the chance to rebuild a safe place and a more robust connection to the inner self (Berger, 2017). Pure healing is known as treatment without drugs or surgery and recognized in this paper as the body's inherent ability to heal itself. For example, time spent in outdoor spaces has natural physiological and psychological benefits, such as reduced stress responses and improved mood. Freud claimed that most of our judgments, feelings, behavior, and struggles in the psyche could be traced back to our inaccessible unconscious mind. The

unconscious mind explained why some of Freud's patients exhibited psychological symptoms without a biological source. Our mind and body can hold an immeasurable amount of the human experience that only a fraction gets processed appropriately. The sensory-based foundational qualities of art in the context of nature are essential in facilitating individuals to communicate with unconscious experiences and discover helpful strategies to cope with them. "By reclaiming the arts as a birthright of being human and reincorporating them into daily life, we naturally turn toward the patterns and rhythms of nature and reciprocity between the human and more-than-human world" (Atkins & Snyder, 2017, p. 56). This paper did not review the differences between nature therapy and other nature-oriented therapeutic practices due to space limitations. I will explore theoretical and applied approaches to nature therapy at greater length in the following sections.

Development of Self

My literature review will center around the sense of self as it is the single common denominator among perfectionism, ecopsychology, and ExAT. Creative expression and activity in nature both lead to a deeper felt sense of connectivity to self. Perfectionistic tendencies stem from the early emergence of self-identity in concurrence to an ever-evolving environment. The striving to always be better than good enough comes from a societal standard to keep moving forward in a bigger and better way and to protect oneself from the consequences of failure. It's no surprise that human development and the view of self are impacted by this expectation to "defy the odds" and present an idealized version of self to the world. Some may argue that complacency is the enemy of progress, and each day we should strive to be better than we were yesterday. This case implies that it's impossible to be happy with who you are and seek growth simultaneously. People tend to improve more when they know they'll be satisfied after

accomplishing their goal instead of never being happy with improvement because it's not yet perfect. Reframing and reforming the *self* both inside and outside the framework of goal setting, accomplishment, competition, or noticeable progress is significant for constructive growth. Can we separate the self as it exists in competition, just as we learn to do with relationships as children?

Jordan (2009) declares that human infants need to negotiate three main aspects in accordance with self throughout the developmental process: "(1) encountering and realizing that it has a "self," (2) the growing realization that this self exists in relation to others, and (3) realizing that this concept of self and others can be expanded to include a relationship with the wider world." As discussed, the development of the psyche and self is at the core of perfectionistic development. The longing for acceptance, belongingness, and validation begins in the first days of existence.

On Being "Good Enough"

The learning environment in which a child builds their sense of self is significant in the root of perfectionistic tendencies. Hamachek (1978, as cited in Greenspon, 2000) described the family dynamic well in his discussion of perfectionism. "Some home environments are non-approving, leading children to believe they can never be good enough" (p. 204). When needs of affection and safety are unmet, the child begins to seek control in other areas to cope with adverse experiences (Flett & Hewitt, 2014). At birth, an infant wants to show other people that they are good enough to be loved. Inevitably, this need follows the individual throughout a lifetime. Like many other unhealthy coping mechanisms, perfectionism can be easy to latch on to and difficult to shake off. This "good enough" philosophy is often paired with a self-imposed burden of shame, guilt, and blame. The issue with always striving for perfection is that new

achievements do not equal a greater capacity for self-love and compassion. Thus, being always left with wanting more.

"Survival of the fittest" is often misunderstood to mean the survival of the biggest, toughest individuals. However, for most organisms in the non-human world, it is not survival of the fittest; it is survival of the good enough. Humans have been around for a mere blink of an eye in comparison to some modern-day species that look identical to their 30-million-year-old fossil ancestors (crocodilians, birds, nautilus). Inviting nature into the therapeutic relationship can be an eye-opening experience for an individual. This approach offers a way to reach for deeper connections to the self with the nonhuman environment as a reminder of the unnecessary need to meet perfection in everyday life. Perhaps, relating to the good enough tendencies that plants and animals survive on can inspire a restored quality of life in humans.

True and False Self

One of the most astonishing justifications as to why some adults struggle so profoundly with self-identity is that as a baby, they were denied the opportunity to be their whole self. It's a normal part of our development. Oddly enough, when things go well, a child develops the *false* sense of self. Winnicott (1960) argues that children are not tolerated anymore as a needy and challenging newborn at a certain point in development. They will start to feel like their basic and truest needs, and desires are not manageable due to the parent's inability to respond sufficiently, no matter how good enough caregivers are. Maybe they are preoccupied with another child, suffering from an illness, mentally unwell, managing career responsibilities, or facing other adversities. This results in what Winnicott describes as "compliance." Winnicott informs us of the idea that in primary developmental stages, people build the "false self" to protect their inner, more vulnerable "true self" as a response to not getting these spontaneous needs met (Lepoutre et

al., 2020). We had to be a false version of ourselves before we ever had the chance to feel fully alive. This false self is ultimately preserving the true self from the risk of destruction with which the environment threatens it. In other words, our false self prepares us for the real world, the rigors of schooling, and the rigidities of work life.

As typical as this developmental process is, the result is that we will have learned to comply far too early; we will have become obedient at the expense of our ability to feel authentically ourselves. Having a powerful false identity keeps people from acting according to their spontaneous play and creative impulses. Thus, leaving the person feeling unanchored, unoriginal, fearful of vulnerability, and not present. At work, someone may be efficient and suitable for the job but lack creativity and innovation. In relationships, they may be respectful and tailor to their partner's needs but guarded and emotionally unavailable for love. Internally, they may seek spontaneity and adventure but constrain themselves due to the demand to stay in control.

Here is where healing comes into play. By inviting the true self and false self into a safe space full of opportunities to let go of control and rule-following, there is room to learn to be real again. Nature is a holding space, and the practitioner is a witness, granting access to experience a new sense of aliveness that should have been played out in childhood. The demand to be an idealized, false self becomes more manageable due to an increased opportunity for our true selves to fully thrive in a controlled, non-judgmental, safe space.

Mirroring Nature's Movements

Nature can be both a teacher and a healer. Twenty-one of 26 participants in a qualitative study aimed at analyzing the effect of spiritual experiences in nature gave fairly lengthy examples of how aspects of the self are reflected through elements (Fire, Air, Earth, Water) and

situations (Naor & Mayseless, 2020). Our immersion in nature can bring out observations, feelings, and attributes of ourselves emphasized in the characteristics of plants, animals, and elements. Metaphors like the traveling flake of snow, the death of a flower, the rush of wind, or the transformation of a leaf all become messages for personal reflection. "Findings reveal that if we perceive ourselves as part of nature, we resonate with it" (Naor & Mayseless, 2020, p. 129). Evans (2018) reflects on an individual she witnessed through a mirrored experience, "She spent her time in conversation with the plant, realizing that this difficult place mirrored some of her own life struggles" (p. 167). Not all aspects of nature are blissful, just like not all aspects of life are idyllic. It is the pain we endure that takes us to unimaginable heights, with a continuous reminder to "look up" (see Journal Entry 6 in Appendix B).

Sometimes discovering a mirror in nature can be both uncomfortable and revelatory, much like how it feels to be vulnerable. In other words, we might feel pain, anxiety, or fear in response to a revelation, but it is the sensitivity in it of itself that marks discovery. This is why with every answered question about the way we exist, three more drift to the surface.

"Experiencing total acceptance in nature provides a gateway to a deep inner truth and identity beyond social and cultural conditions" (Naor & Mayseless, 2020, p. 126). With radical self-acceptance, we become open to what nature has to offer. The nonhuman natural world elicits experiences of mirroring from the outside of what individuals might feel on the inside, "for it goes beyond aspects of our persona, revealing our authentic and inner truth" (p. 125). Finding the ability to spontaneously open the heart and genuinely listen to how the environment responds introduces a new and authentic revelation into the mind, body, and spirit.

Attunement

Therapeutic attunement involves a level of spontaneity and organic play in the form of experimentation and risk-taking. These happen to be actions that perfectionists often steer clear of when in the position of trying something new. The fear of not being good enough is recognizably more prevalent when individuals explore more intimidating, unfamiliar materials. Freud's spontaneous wordplay and Jung's improvisational sand play are both approaches to releasing unconscious materials and resistance to free form expression (Kossak, 2009). Nature offers an opportunity to let go of control and play with the manipulation of found materials. As used in this paper, found materials refer to a natural object found not originally intended as art but is considered to connect to the artist. Attuning to organic play, natural materials, and the immediate environment creates the opportunity to develop a sense of safety and mastery into the inner world.

Tuning into every move, every felt sense, every piece of existence there is to offer draws in heightened sensitivity to an inner state of being. Many individuals equate this to meditative practice through listening to your breath, feeling your heartbeat, or sensing the ground beneath your feet. Attunement is used in this article as a body-centered experience that is "both individualistic as well as communal, that includes a psychological, emotional, and somatic state of consciousness" (Kossak, 2009, p. 14). The significance of attunement in the therapeutic relationship lies in the therapist's alignment with themselves, the client, and the immediate environment before engaging in a more meaningful connection. The ability to be attuned comes down to how connected to our clients we are in the process and how successfully we can communicate that to them. The way we respond, offer experiential opportunities or challenge the client are all a result of this attunement. The skill of attunement is central to helping clients move

towards greater ease with their emotional self. Training therapists in facilitating attunement with nature would be an excellent avenue for future exploration and is examined further in my discussion section.

Perfectionism and Expression

Paolo Knill (2003) investigates perfectionistic tendencies by noting that many of us are learning that the quality of art lies in the perfection of manual skills that enable us to handle art materials. Knill demonstrates the principle of “low skill, high sensitivity approach, which allows for exposure to materials, individualized guidance, and a safe space to explore regardless of any experience or training” (p. 150). Low skill, high sensitivity is a challenging concept to introduce to individuals who haven't put a paintbrush in their hands since they were children or touched a piano in their lifetime. Our tendency to want to be better than good enough comes from a place of growing concern over mistakes, comparison to others, high personal standards, and push for flawlessness. Many art forms can be intimidating and overwhelming to look at because of this. We are conditioned into thinking that the search for success, beauty, and perfection is the search for truth. Responding to beauty puts us in a position of judgment based on our own unique interpretations of what beauty and perfection is. ExAT offers a chance to lean in closer to resistance and give a voice to the process.

Perfectionism, at its core, stunts creativity and imagination. Jowett et al. (2021, as cited in Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), describes perfectionism as a "multidimensional personality trait characterized by striving for exceedingly high standards accompanied by harsh criticism" (p. 134). As many people believe perfectionism is an attribute to their success, these tendencies stem from a long line of repressed emotional pain. They can lead to a cycle of frequent feelings of distress and inadequacy. No matter what level of achievement is reached,

there will always be a want for more. Ironically, the thought of changing or trying something new is terrifying to a person with perfectionism. Vulnerability sits at the base of anything new and intimidating. The anxiety that stems from not having control over an outcome often leads to pulling away from something that offers healing opportunities. When something new requires an unknown or untouched skill, our self-critic enters the room. The first thing we hear is, "I'm not enough." This inner critic is a dynamic that exists within every individual and offers a negative filter to view our lives. ExAT requires a particular type of risk-taking that involves an openness to the truest version of the self. It's an openness that looks like staring at a blank canvas without a plan, dancing to no music in front of another person, or reading a personal poem aloud. Without security, pure and authentic expression meets shame and embarrassment.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Perfectionism

Perfectionism is quite widespread today. It's noticed in needing to be "pulled together" in public, not sharing ideas unless they are fully organized, living by lists and the daily goal to be productive, feeling guilty for relaxing, procrastination due to the thought that a high standard will not be reached, lack of trust to delegate tasks, or the obsession with not wasting time. Flett & Hewitt (2014) defines two types of perfectionists: maladaptive (unhealthy) and adaptive (healthy) perfectionists. "People with high standards but low self-reported discrepancy are considered *adaptive perfectionists*." Those with high standards and a significant discrepancy are considered *maladaptive perfectionists*, with a chronic sense of falling short of their high standards" (p. 900). Maladaptive perfectionism is characterized by excessive preoccupation with mistakes, doubts about doing something correctly, or fear of disapproval from others' high expectations. James et al. (2015) suggests that the unhealthy perfectionism–distress relationship is mediated by higher levels of self-critical thinking (p. 128). On the contrary, adaptive

perfectionism can be characterized by setting high but realistic standards for the self and others, being persistent in the face of adversity, and not resorting to negative self-talk when expected results don't happen. A person has adaptive perfectionism if their goals make them feel more energized and not so much overwhelmed, anxious, or paralyzed.

Perfectionism as a whole puts an unremitting, unreasonable pressure on an individual to achieve the unachievable as a human. It manages to take away inner bliss and spontaneity because it keeps us from trying things that we think require natural talent and proficiency. I often revert to Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story of Success* to offer a new perspective on achievement and risk-taking. Gladwell proposed the 10,000-hour rule as the key to success, claiming that practicing a skill for around 10,000 hours brings an individual to arrive at the expertise that's considered to be world-class (Gladwell, 2008). This consideration offers hope to folks who initially think it takes genetics and wealth to succeed in something. It re-directs the thought life back to the process, rather than solely focusing on the product. Knill et al. (2004) points out that "in viewing therapy as an *artistic* process, we find that *the process itself* offers by far the most significant therapeutic value" (p. 140). The need to arrive at something optimally clear and understandable leads to the desire to upgrade skills and master specific techniques. Comparison to others, relationship to judgment, and fear of vulnerability make it even more difficult to find clarity in the process, which is why the connection to the nonhuman world is so important. Being accepted even though you are not perfect is a powerful and essential insight. The more-than-human natural world serves as a powerful partner in the process of finding assurance when restoring the sense of self. To say "I am a reformed perfectionist" reminds me that there is no such thing as perfect or failure, that I exist on a sliding spectrum of *good enough*, and that is okay.

The More-Than-Human Natural World

Our discovery of self comes through the interrelatedness of natural and social ecosystems. The way we build our consciousness, thoughts, and feelings is directly related to our experience of physical, social, and mental space. The field of ecopsychology and the practice of ecotherapy involves an exploratory conversation between humankind and the more-than-human natural world. Adams (2005) declares that "we always already exist in an inseparable, intimate interrelationship with nature as an authentic other" (p. 274). The more-than-human other exists in water that makes up over 70% of Earth's surface and is required to supply us with the food we eat. The more-than-human other exists in bacteria that inhibit our bodies to digest food or fight illnesses, bees and butterflies that help pollinate the planets' crops and trees, the maggots and worms that make sure leaves and rotting foods turn into compost and make soil nutritious again. It exists in air, forests, oil, minerals, soil, natural gas, among countless more. It is unfathomable that the reliance humans have on the nonhuman other is unrecognized and underappreciated to the extent of irreversible climate damage.

Therapy in the Face of Climate Change

Suppose a therapeutic relationship with nature offers the opportunity to build environmental empathy. By forming a more intimate relationship with the nonhuman world, it's likely to be better understood by humans as something that must be valued and protected. Hasbach (2015) challenges humankind with considering a "reorientation" of our relationship to Earth in an article named *Therapy in the Face of Climate Change*. "The shift requires a transformation of consciousness from seeing the world as an object to be exploited or a resource to be plundered to knowing and living a profound interconnection with all that is" (p. 205). By exploring the sense of self in relation to the nonhuman world, it is likely that stronger pro-

environmental behavior will ensue. Imagine a world where humans protected their environment to the same degree at which they protect their mothers or primary caregivers. Though further investigation on this subject matter is beyond the scope of this paper, there is no doubt that further research would support the high levels of impact therapy can have on the ecological self.

Biophilia Hypothesis

According to a 2001 study sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Americans on average spend 7% of their lives in the outdoors (Klepeis et al., 2001). This is an unnerving lack of connection to an entity that we rely on for life. Chang et al. (2020) writes about global evidence of the biophilia hypothesis, humanity's innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. "Humans largely relied on natural resources for survival and reproduction in human history. This led them to evolve a tendency to prefer being close to nature through an emotional connection" (p. 2). Our dependence on relationships in development does not stop with the mother/child connection or connection to self. The unspoken rhyme or reason of our existence is human's connection with nature.

Nature Deficit Disorder

The term Nature-Deficit Disorder (NDD) was introduced in 2005 in a publication by Richard Louv. Louv (2005, as cited in Louv, 2019) coined the term NDD "to serve as a description of the human costs of alienation from nature, not meant to be a medical diagnosis but as a way to talk about an urgent problem that many of us knew was growing but had no language to describe it" (para. 2). Many studies have focused on what is gained through more exposure to nature, but not so much on what is lost when nature experience fades. Parents are more often keeping their children indoors to save them from danger rather than allowing for learning and growth opportunities. The issue is even more blatant now with a worldwide pandemic, forcing

individuals to deter from spending time in communal parks and nearby playgrounds. Louv (2005) claims that spending less time outdoors leads to a wide range of behavioral problems in children. These problems are linked more broadly to the lack of physical activity and devaluing of independent play, let alone a lesser developed ecological self.

Play is an invaluable element in a child's life. Often children are aware that something is not quite right, or something needs to change in their lives or behavior, but they do not always have the verbal capacity to discuss the problems. Play provides a vehicle for healing from difficult experiences, resolving internal conflicts which can cause behavior problems, expanding a child's sense of options in problem solving as well as practicing new ways of relating and behaving. Westlund (2015) sums up neuroscientist Kelly Lambert's research appropriately in saying that "people all over the world today are engaging almost exclusively in cognitive tasks, which leave the body behind" (p. 163). Our minds and bodies are hungry for more time playing outdoors because we spend most of our lives disconnected from the natural world when we are inherently bound to it (Todesco, 2003).

Triangular Relationship

Berger (2017) introduces the "triangular relationship" as a central concept in nature therapy, which broadens the typical therapeutic relationship between therapist and client by introducing nature as a third entity. Nature can serve as an active partner in the therapeutic relationship, a backdrop, a field of play, or a working instrument. It's up to the client to listen and reflect on what form they are connecting to and it's up to the therapist to decide how their presence best fits in to the process. Bettina Evans (2018) prompted her students with a task to find a "welcoming place" to seek out and sit with while Alexander Kopytin (2017) asks his subjects to create a green mandala using natural objects in the environment that they feel

connected to, have some affinity with, or which can represent their personality. Berger (2017) states even though this concept relates closely to the artistic form, which can be regarded as a third element in ExAT work, "nature is a living, independent entity that gives this triangular relationship a unique meaning in the context of Nature Therapy" (p. 249). How often do you feel comfort towards, establish trust in, or show more of yourself to someone who has experienced a similar challenge? Nature and its living, dying, or transitioning elements are arguably more empathetic to the living, dying, or transitioning human experience than are other humans. Rachel Carson (2002) emphasizes that "In nature, nothing exists alone" (p. 35). The sense of self feels secure in nature's company not only for its reliability but also its relatability.

Safety and Security

The feeling of safety is something experienced in the body. "The daily, monthly, and seasonal cycles of sun, moon, and Earth offer security in their consistency. They teach patience. They're slow-moving, yet they steadily and steadfastly move forward with each breath" (Godefroy, personal communication, February 4, 2021). Nature serves as an active and reliable partner in the triangular relationship, present even when a therapist is not. The significant process of establishing safety and security in nature was recognized by the participants in the Noar & Mayseless (2020) study. They link nature to specific qualities described as "unconditional, loving, accepting, and non-judgmental" (p. 125). Such qualities enable individuals to let go of expectations to be something that is unattainable and focus on being present with the moment, something ExAT experts call the "here-and-now." Greenspon (2000) proclaims "A psychodynamic understanding of perfectionism reveals that a feeling of conditional acceptance underlies the desire for perfection." (Greenspon, 2000, p. 198). An apparent othering of nature in the context of 'escape' "is that nature can offer a place or feeling of no judgement, or a different

judgement, and this relates to a more secure sense of self" (Birch, 2020, p. 8). Utilizing nature as a secure base in the therapeutic relationship ultimately supplies a safe space to unapologetically and imperfectly be yourself.

Theoretical and Applied Approaches

There are a wide variety of approaches to therapy in outdoor spaces. Regardless of what form the relationship takes, opportunities of discovery are limitless. I've spoken thus far about the relationship to self, how perfectionism impacts the ability to connect fully to our true selves, and where nature plays into that narrative. I will now navigate through particular ways in which nature calls in security, interconnectedness, and agency. Though ecotherapy is a young and developing discipline, numerous studies can confirm that nature is a powerful entity in the process of healing. "[Nature] takes our thinking of the healing process beyond the therapy office into a more-than-human field of what might be called for in the healing process" (Westlund, 2015, p. 173).

Narrative Play in Nature

Storytelling is at the root of the conscious self. Begin a new chapter in life, turn a new page, re-write the narrative; these are all phrases ingrained into a dictionary of obscure sorrows. Narrative therapy is a psychological approach that aims to adjust and tell alternative stories about one's life so they better match who and what they want to be. Hopelessness and obstruction often hold a weight too much to bear until the realization that control exists in other forms. What is lost in some areas is found in another; what is repressed can be discovered. Play therapy is based on the premise that a child's natural language is play. For children, toys are the means of communication and play is the process of telling the story of their inner lives. Cattanach (2006) explains that "Narrative therapy can be used in play therapy as a way of helping children express

and explore their experiences of life” (p. 83). Adults can reap the same benefits of narrative play therapy, but often find it trickier engaging in imaginative play.

Todesco (2003) emphasizes that distractions preventing an adult individual from noticing pain or difficulty are removed in a wilderness setting. Natural settings can be beneficial for therapeutic techniques because "it is difficult to repress feelings without the noise and haste of modern life" (p. 96). Most often, individuals use nature as a means to escape. When combined with narrative play, this escape opens up an opportunity to be vulnerable and lean into discovery using components of nature as tools. "Nature therapy not only utilizes natural materials for artmaking, but also relates to changes made by nature as part of the process, which can trigger metaphors, feelings, and memories that deepen and enrich that process" (Berger, 2017, p. 249). Storytelling is at the root of the conscious self, but nature calls in a richer conversation.

Shinrin-Yoku (Forest Bathing)

Shinrin-Yoku (SY), otherwise known as Forest Bathing, is defined by Hansen et al. (2017) as "a traditional Japanese practice of immersing oneself in nature by mindfully using all five senses" (p. 1). SY may be considered another form of nature therapy in the context of Song, Ikei and Miyazaki's (2016) Concept of Nature Therapy (CNT) model. CNT is defined as "a set of practices aimed at achieving 'preventive medical effects' through exposure to natural stimuli that render a state of physiological relaxation and boost the weakened immune functions to prevent diseases" (p. 2). Hansen et al. collected and reviewed 127 papers, 64 of which supported the physiological and psychological effects of SY on stress and potential burn-out.

In the 2-day Korean forest therapy program, participants reported significant decreases in pain, depression and increased quality of life (Han, 2016). A quantitative study in Japan aiming to elucidate how floral fragrance could impact human health observed that sensory stimuli from

plants may reduce stress and provide a general sense of wellbeing among the population (Jo, 2013). 12 subjects in a Japan study were sent to a forest area and a city area and instructed to walk around in their location and sit on chairs observing the landscape. The results of compared activity in the prefrontal cortex and cortisol levels of both groups show that SY can effectively relax both people's body and spirit (Park, 2008). 71 healthy adults with sleep complaints were advised to engage in two-hour forest walking sessions over the course of 8 different weekend days. Results indicated that 2 hours of forest walking improved sleep characteristics, which impacted sleep time, immobile minutes, self-rated depth of sleep, and sleep quality. The practice of SY and nature therapy cultivate existential realism and offer humans an authentic way of healing along with health prevention for the mind, body, and spirit.

Slow Travel

Over the past year, people have reverted to several forms of slow travel - walking, cycling, kayaking, hiking - as a way of escaping chaos and isolation or modifying exercise routines to fit the circumstances of a global pandemic caused by coronavirus. Arnds (2020) reflects on literary authors who have ventured at-length across land on foot, "*Slowness* here becomes less a reference to measurable speed than a way of accounting for the joyful experience of autonomous, self-propelled movement" (p. 5). It took the world slowing down for people to realize in what ways they were suffering from and reconsider the value of natural outdoor settings. People were met with a challenge to find alternative ways of coping with their daily stress and nature became a dependable normality during these extraordinary times. In many instances, creative expression accompanied it. Stones painted different colors followed walkers on trails, socially distanced drum circles gathered weekly in the park, chalk art inspired cyclists

to "keep moving forward." While humans were forced to make serious adjustments for the sake of their own lives, nature was treasured.

Not surprisingly, while humanity hunkered down, nature recuperated (Arnds, 2020). Beau Miles, backyard adventurer who walked his work commute of 60 miles, reflected on a quote by Aldo Leopold saying, "The more roads we have, the less beautiful our minds are, as if our bodies and senses are underdone because we are no longer on our feet" (Miles, 2021). Leopold says, "Civilization has so cluttered this elemental man-earth relationship with gadgets and middlemen that awareness of it is growing dim. We fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry" (Leopold, 1989). Slow travel allows an opportunity to step back, reflect on the features of ground we walk, ride, or swim on, and consider the impact it has on us and us on it.

As an individual who shares the privilege of having slow traveled nearly 4,000 miles across America, I, too, reflect on the power of nature and its vastness. This next section will give insight to my personal experience with perfectionism as it has informed my thesis journey. I will delve into my individual narrative using an auto-ethnographic lens and present my personal processing of experiences facing and fighting perfectionism, explore how nature brought me here and how this practice continues to lead me toward a more secure version of my authentic myself. The story of reformed perfectionism doesn't stop here, but this particular chapter deserves an honorable closure, and within my writing is how I chose to do it.

Auto-Ethnography

Due to the challenges of conducting research during a pandemic, I have chosen to explore this topic using an auto-ethnographic research approach. Ellis & Adams (2014) defines autoethnography as "research, writing, stories, and methods that connect the autobiographical

and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (p. 254). My explorations and observations of the transformative impact the natural world has on the sense of self have driven me to share the work I have done as personal reflection. In this section, I will share those self-reflections via artmaking and journal-writing as I used them to explore the experience that led me to this topic and the experience of combating perfectionism throughout the thesis writing process. I began the process by looking deeper into a life-changing experience (see Appendix B).

4k For Cancer (Summer, 2019)

I took a risk to ride my bicycle across America during a time when each day was a new battle of doubt and fear that my life would not turn out as I expected. A debilitating physiological reaction to anxiety took me away from my work, my schooling, my relationships, and my passions. At my core, I understood that “no one is perfect” but I was unknowingly striving for my version of perfect. This became a distress I could no longer bear. I longed for an avenue of release and had no idea where to find it. “Here I am,” I said in a blog post four days before my departure, “Pushing 75% mentally prepared. I won’t get to 100. Does anyone ever really get to 100?” (see Journal Entry 1 in Appendix B). This was the first time I confronted my perfectionism.

Prior to this experience, I was asked about why I would want to do something so grand. What was the point of putting my mind and body through that? What would keep me going when it got hard? Who will I be thinking about during my highest highs and my lowest lows? (see Journal Entry 2 in Appendix B). I reflected on this experience a lot throughout my thesis process. The questions of “why” as they were for my cycling adventure correlated to the auto-ethnographic approach I took in this ExAT journey to my own self-identity. I asked myself why I would want to write about something that hits so close to home? What would keep me going

when it got hard? Who will I be thinking about during the process? The answer has always been written into my relationship with the arts, nature, and my true self.

I was really trying to understand how this powerful experience could inform my work as an expressive arts therapist, so I began to dig through old journals and dive into the difficult parts of my 70-day journey across America. While looking back, I noticed that I started to let go of the control I desperately needed to feel safe when there was only one thing that required my full attention: my body. Eat, hydrate, stay alive. Those were my responsibilities. I started paying closer attention to my surroundings while I peddled, “making friends with river rapids and wildflowers popping out of cracks in massive rock walls” (see Journal Entry 6 in Appendix B). I started to look at nature as a symbol, rather than an obstacle. I realized how small I was in relation to these towering mountains and, in turn, how small my fears were. I noticed that my mood mirrored the weather, my pain subsided in moments of awe, and my mental health found relief within the spiritual dimensions of the natural world. I knew that only after coming home and reflecting on these moments, I needed to write about them. And it wasn’t until writing this paper that found I could use all the things I learned as an avenue into a deeper frame of self-perception.

As I reflected on my experience biking, I acknowledged that there were days on the road when I felt like I couldn’t take one more gust of wind to the face, bug bite, nauseating whiff of roadkill, night terror, or spike of pain in my broken wrist. When all I wanted to do was turn around, I would write “look up” on my knees and in the brink of defeat, I’d see hope (see Journal Entry 6 in Appendix B). I’d see it in the snow-capped mountains, the weeds that bloomed through concrete, the strength of 40 mph winds, the power of 95-degree heat on my skin. Deep down under the layers of sunburn, dirt, sweat, and tears, I’d find the strength to see it through the

finish line. Mental health is a never-ending relationship with the self that left me sitting in discomfort day after day, out of control and spiraling downward. Using what nature put in front of me as the beginning of a conversation aided in strengthening the relationship I had with myself. I decided that I wanted to use this experience to encourage others to also look up, and take in what's around, and see that blue skies are coming.

Arts-Based Research (Spring, 2021)

This section will focus more on what I did during my thesis writing process, what I became aware of, and how that informed my curiosity further. I engaged in arts-based exploration of my own literary journey that included journal writing, eco-art, repurposing, movement work, painting, photography, and intermodal transfers. I used this writing process as an opportunity to explore my feelings of *enoughness* and aim for a transformative journey of my identity into an individual who is proud rather than penitential (see Appendix A). My approach was simple: 1) use the arts, 2) invite nature into the conversation, and 3) respond to everything internal and external. Throughout the course of this section, you will have a front row seat into what I did and what I became aware of in my own journey to a more secure self-identity.

When it comes to writing, I feel less compelled to show my work. This stems from a longstanding lack of confidence in how I articulate myself (see Journal Entry 2 in Appendix A); not feeling smart enough, clever enough, well-versed enough, cultured enough. These “not enough” thoughts led to heightened feelings of inadequacy as a teenager and young adult and a core piece of my developing self-identity. I ask myself in a journal entry, “Where did all of these unreasonable expectations to be more than enough come from?” (see Journal Entry 2 in Appendix A). Growing up, I let my overcommitment to sports and extracurriculars do all the talking for me. I was constantly relying on the validation from others as it led me to the belief

that I was enough because I had a purpose. This *enoughness* led into graduate school, when I questioned whether I was a good enough artist to be in this program or if I would be a good enough therapist when I had my own plethora of mental health setbacks? Again, I reflected on these questions as I started the writing process and considered the following aspects of key development: trust, change, and discomfort.

I spent some time reflecting on “home” after experiencing loss in the middle of my thesis writing process (See Journal Entry 3 in Appendix A). I glued flower petals in the shape of H-O-M-E and finger painted with splashes of red wine. During that time, I looked back on several formational experiences in my development and I realized that I spent a lifetime playing catch up, trying to be better than I was, to hold myself accountable for what I was capable of, and not get hurt in the process. I always wanted to be done before I even started and completely looked over the process of getting from here to there. I was so distracted by *enoughness* that I didn’t notice any real growth in myself. Perfectionism couldn’t shield me from my own truth and that was when my body began to tell me something needed to change. I put a filter on the actuality of myself in this creation of falseness that, in the end, strongly influenced my mental well-being. My anxiety manifested in the need to be seen positively but the desire to be seen in a certain way has taught me to silence my troubles, leading to a lack of knowing how to express or manage my inner chaos without feeling like accepting social defeat. One invaluable lesson I gained from that artistic exploration is that true identity isn’t something I will find while looking around the room at everyone else waiting for approval. I wrote song lyrics in my journal “I am my own house” (see Journal Entry 3 in Appendix A).

After increasing overwhelm, burn-out, and on the verge of giving up, I began to doodle one day. I wrote in my journal, “Circles intertwined and overlapped, imperfect and

asymmetrical. Flowers poke out and make their way to the surface to be noticed as a primary component in all the mess” (see Journal Entry 5 in Appendix A). I like to explain my thought life sometimes as “a beautiful mess”. Derek DelGaudio ends his stage-show stating, “I’m more than just one thing. I’m defined by what you see, but I’m also defined by all the things you will never see” (Oz, 2020). I recognized during this artistic exploration that it wasn’t the perfectionism didn’t deserve the credit for getting me here. It was the passion, grit, trust, loyalty, creativity, empathy that also makes up who I am. It was also making mistakes, losing games, taking risks, falling and getting back up, heart break, burn-out, and pain that led me to my true self. My true identity lies in so many things, positive and negative. Why continue to allow perfectionism to get in the way of the opportunity to allow more of myself to be seen?

The truth is, it took a lot for me to get here, to find the ability to accept this quality of work I am presenting, and to honor that work enough to let it go. If I held myself to the standard I always knew, I would have never finished this piece. I would have been stuck procrastinating because my idea of master’s level work is not attainable in the small amount of time I have, so why even try? If I didn’t grow into who I am now, you would not be seeing this final product because I would not have felt complacent enough to share it. I’ve learned through this experience that the need to be perfect limits my ability to create. I went out in nature and spent 25 miles trekking the Appalachian Trail after submitting my rough draft. Out there, I noticed that nature did successfully help me divert my false narrative, which made room to translate what my true self was trying to voice (see Journal Entry 7 in Appendix A). I got to finally open the door into what I already knew with just a shift of perspective.

Expressive arts therapy, while using nature as a guide, aims to help navigate clients into thinking more about the process of creating and not so much about the quality of the product.

Attuning to the body and allowing someone to witness you through the experience of creating adds an entirely new component in the mix. It also allows us to foster a more authentic relationship with the sense of self. The addition to nature as a witness, navigator, or character transforms a journey into a lesson through pain and anguish but allows unpleasant change easier to accept with its simultaneous capacity to heal. In the spirit of autoethnographic research, I feel comfortable now stating “What I present for you here is good enough, and I am finally okay with that.”

Discussion

This paper reviewed literature on ecotherapy and nature-based approaches to expressive therapy with particular attention on the sense of self as it transforms with a deeper connection to the more-than-human natural world. My intention was to construct a problem-awareness approach to literature analysis that initially brought to attention the problem of perfectionism both inside and outside of the therapeutic space. Within the “problem-awareness approach,” I described the nature of the problem at hand, which was that perfectionism limits the capacity for creativity and authenticity (Hart, 1998, pp. 188). I then showed relevance of this problem to the reader by unpacking the inhibitions of the self throughout development. I revealed the consequences of continued behavior in focusing on the way in which perfectionism is manifested. I outlined an approach for tackling the problem by suggesting theoretical and applied approaches to using nature-based approach to ExAT. Based on qualitative and quantitative findings, autoethnographic revelations, and comparative themes, I continue to strongly believe that the engagement in an authentic triangular relationship (client-therapist-nature) can aid in combating perfectionistic tendencies observed in clients who question their competency in the ExAT practice.

After displaying more of the non-human natural world through a different lens, the notion is that the curse of perfectionism is rooted in an unhealthy relationship with nature. There is a noticeable increase in difficulty managing pain and discomfort for individuals living with perfectionism. On average, humans are stuck indoors for 93% of their lives, which strips them from fulfilling their truest and most basic needs; to belong, to feel heard, and to feel safe in the face of vulnerability. I am not saying it is impossible to live a healthy life with perfectionistic tendencies but using nature as a co-therapist can be a restorative function to combat the negative impacts of such behavior. Being within nature where one feels safe leads to an openness to trust. Being within nature where one feels heard leads to self-discovery. Being with nature where one feels acceptance leads to a deeper felt sense of self.

These next sections will inform my suggestions for future research.

Environmental Racism

Communities of color are strongly impacted by racial discrimination in environmental policymaking that forces them to live in the proximity to sources of toxic waste and leaves them excluded from involvement in ecology movements. This form of systematic racism contributes to the likelihood of exposure to hazardous substances and little to no access to nearby green spaces, among many more disparities. These challenges frame significant implications that without systematic change, my therapeutic approach would not pertain. Future research might look specifically at how environmental racism impacts the relationship to nature and more considerably the relationship to a secure sense of self.

Accessibility

After working at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp (HITWG) for 3 years, I gained perspective on how valuable accessibility in outdoor spaces can be for people with varying

abilities (<https://www.holeinthewallgang.org/>). HITWG provides programming for children with life-threatening illnesses and is part of a wider network of 30 camps around the world. HITWG is home to one of the largest wheelchair-accessible treehouses in the world, offers a temperature-controlled pool for young people to swim, and allows campers to participate in traditional camp activities while receiving care from a significant medical presence. Future projects might look at how accessibility in outdoor facilities significantly impacts nature-based therapeutic benefits for individuals living with physical restrictions?

Protection of Sacred Land

The more society erupts, the more difficult it gets to find pure and untouched land that isn't violated. U.S. laws and court cases involving sacred land have been in place since the 70's. The National Park System aims to protect and secure land while also provide an opportunity for visitation of over 250 million visitors per year (National Park Service, 2021). Despite heavy foot traffic and difficulty preventing people from disturbing the environment, there would be even less circulation of knowledge about how to keep land safe without those visitors as a whole (Hall, personal communication, April 18, 2021). How can securing and protecting native land lead to more opportunities for a stronger relationship to the environment and, ultimately, a deeper therapeutic value. How can appropriately educating visitors and creating a higher quality experience impact how they choose to protect the environment down the road? (Morgan, personal communication, April 18, 2021).

Working with Young People

My decision not to focus on a particular population was intended to enlighten my audience on the wide range of possibilities this approach can offer. However, I came across numerous articles that focused solely on the young person population, from engaging in a bodily

experience that lacks due to prolonged time spent sitting in classrooms to generating a sense of confidence by working artistically in nature. After working closely doing trauma-informed play therapy with children this year, I am particularly interested in more opportunities to involve young people in the ongoing conversation about therapeutic opportunities in nature, especially in urban environments. Future research could focus on the benefits of in-school or after-school programming for young people that involves development and maintenance of an urban community garden.

Conclusion

The aim of this interdisciplinary and comprehensive literature review was to investigate how nature-informed expressive arts therapy can aid in preventing perfectionism by facilitating a deeper connection to the sense of self. This literature review explored preliminary and contemporary research in developmental psychology, transpersonal psychology, and psychodynamic theory to explore the foundations of ExAT, perfectionism, and ecopsychology. I surveyed research in the development of self and investigated perfectionism in expression to show the relevance of perfectionism and its strong impact on the sense of self. I examined additional perspectives of the more-than-human natural world to demonstrate the relational significance of nature. I believe the theoretical and applied approaches discussed in this paper recognized the vast benefits of nature and the arts as relational therapeutic entities and can benefit those in both the expressive arts therapy and ecotherapy fields.

As I reflect on my time writing this capstone thesis literature review (see Appendix A), and my experience biking (see Appendix B), I think about the discomfort of challenging undertakings. In all honesty, eliminating the feeling of discomfort is not the main priority in this capstone thesis, nor in therapy as a whole. It is the ability to better tolerate and manage

discomfort that remains a serious impairment among many individuals who experience mental health issues. Throughout this journey of exploring who I am in the uncomfortable, I learned more about my sense of self, my mental health, and my capacity for healing. The process, in and of itself, helped me come up with my point of view as I became more aware of my own experience. I realized as I reflected on my own perfectionism that there was a breakthrough for me in that experience. “My truest form sits in comfort and grows in lack thereof,” I wrote in my journal while reflecting on what home is for me (see Journal Entry 3 in Appendix A). Adding nature as a component in my discovery process allowed me an opportunity to explore and eventually trust that I am enough because of my imperfections. If I lack openness into my true self, my client will pick up on that and follow suit. If I let go of trying to be a perfect therapist, my client will let go of trying to be a perfect individual.

Following an extensive journey into my own personal experience of using the arts and nature to combat perfectionism, I believe there is great potential in this work and am eager to create a safe and inclusive environment for other individuals to explore personal journeys of their own. There is not one person in the world who does not deserve the right to find value in the limitlessness of the more-than-human natural world. As I continue the conversation rounding the significance of natural spaces and ExAT on mental well-being, I want to advocate for further research in the direction of physical, mental, and cultural diversity in the field.

References

- Adams, W. W. (2005). Ecopsychology and phenomenology. *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, 16(2), 269–283. Retrieved March 10, 2021 from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=aph&AN=20567187&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Atkins, S., & Snyder, M. (2017). *Nature-based expressive arts therapy: Integrating the expressive arts and ecotherapy*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Berger, R. (2017). Nature therapy: Incorporating nature into arts therapy. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 60(2), 244–257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167817696828>.
- Borg, L. K. (2013). *Holding, attaching and relating: A theoretical perspective on good enough therapy through analysis of Winnicott's good enough mother, using Bowlby's attachment theory and relational theory*. (Publication No. 588) [Masters Thesis, Smith College]. Smith ScholarWorks, Digital Commons Network. Retrieved March 10, 2021 from <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/588>.
- Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. [eBook edition]. Hazelden Publishing. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=5DT91ar7MwkC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=The+gifts+of+imperfection>.
- Carson, R. (2002). *Silent spring*. [eBook edition]. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=6sRtTjwwWYEC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Silent+spring>
- Cattanach, A. (2006). Narrative play therapy. *Contemporary play therapy: Theory, research, and practice*, 82-99. Retrieved April 24, 2021 from <https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net>.

- Chang, C. C., Cheng, G. J. Y., Le Nghiem, T. P., Song, X. P., Oh, R. R. Y., Richards, D. R., & Carrasco, L. R. (2020). Social media, nature, and life satisfaction: Global evidence of the biophilia hypothesis. *Scientific Reports*, *10*(1), 1-8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-60902-w>.
- Conn, S. A. (1998). Living in the Earth: Ecopsychology, health and psychotherapy. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, *26*(1-3), 179-198. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08873267.1998.9976972>.
- Ellis, C., & Adams, T. E. (2014). The purposes, practices, and principles of autoethnographic research. *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 254-276.
- Evans, B. (2018). Earthbound teaching nature connected arts therapy. *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy (CAET)*, *4*(2), 164-173. <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2018/4/26>.
- Fisher, A. (2013). *Radical ecopsychology : Psychology in the service of life*. [eBook edition]. Suny Press. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>.
- Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2014). A proposed framework for preventing perfectionism and promoting resilience and mental health among vulnerable children and adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools*, *51*(9), 899-912. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/pits.21792>.
- Ganske, K. H., Gnilka, P. B., Ashby, J. S., & Rice, K. G. (2015). The relationship between counseling trainee perfectionism and the working alliance with supervisor and client. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *93*(1), 14-24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00177.x>
- Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. Little, Brown.

- Greenspon, T. S. (2000). "Healthy perfectionism" is an oxymoron!: Reflections on the psychology of perfectionism and the sociology of science. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 11(4), 197-208. <https://doi.org/10.4219/jsge-2000-631>.
- Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. SAGE Publications. <https://www.academia.edu/download/50298357/Doing-a-Literature-Review-HART.pdf>.
- Han, J. W., Choi, H., Jeon, Y. H., Yoon, C. H., Woo, J. M., & Kim, W. (2016). The effects of forest therapy on coping with chronic widespread pain: Physiological and psychological differences between participants in a forest therapy program and a control group. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 13(3), 255. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13030255>.
- Hansen, M. M., Jones, R., & Tocchini, K. (2017). Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) and nature therapy: A state-of-the-art review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(8), 851. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14080851>.
- Hasbach, P. H. (2015). Therapy in the face of climate change. *Ecopsychology*, 7(4), 205-210. <https://doi.org/10.1089/eco.2015.0018>.
- The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp. (n.d.). <https://www.holeinthewallgang.org/>.
- James, K., Verplanken, B., & Rimes, K. A. (2015). Self-criticism as a mediator in the relationship between unhealthy perfectionism and distress. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 79, 123–128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.01.030>.
- Jo, H., Rodiek, S., Fujii, E., Miyazaki, Y., Park, B. J., & Ann, S. W. (2013). Physiological and psychological response to floral scent. *HortScience*, 48(1), 82-88. <https://doi.org/10.21273/HORTSCI.48.1.82>.

Jordan, M. (2009). Nature and self—An ambivalent attachment?. *Ecopsychology*, *1*(1), 26-31.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1089/eco.2008.0003>.

Jowett, G. E., Hill, A. P., Curran, T., Hall, H. K., & Clements, L. (2021). Perfectionism, burnout, and engagement in dance: The moderating role of autonomy support. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*, *10*(1), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000232>.

Klepeis, N. E., Nelson, W. C., Ott, W. R., Robinson, J. P., Tsang, A. M., Switzer, P., Behar, J.

V., Hern, S. C., & Engelmann, W. H. (2001). The national human activity pattern survey (NHAPS): A resource for assessing exposure to environmental pollutants. *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology*, *11*(3), 231-252.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/sj.jea.7500165>.

Kopytin, A. (2017). The green mandala: Where eastern wisdom meets ecopsychology. *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy*, *3*(2), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2017/3/2>.

Knill, P. J., Barba, H. N., Fuchs, K. M. (2004). *Minstrels of soul: Intermodal expressive therapy* (Second ed.). EGS Press.

Kossak, M. S. (2009). Therapeutic attunement: A transpersonal view of expressive arts therapy. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, *36*(1), 13–18.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2008.09.003>.

Kreshak, R. (2020). *Good-enough therapeutic space design: A literature review and considerations for expressive arts therapy*. (307) [Masters thesis, Lesley University].

Digital Commons Network. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/307.

Lepoutre, T., Fernandez, I., Chevalier, F., Lenormand, M., & Guérin, N. (2020). The psychoanalytical boundaries of the ego: Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Lacan. *L'Évolution Psychiatrique*, *85*(4), e1–e27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evopsy.2020.08.003>.

Louv, R., (2019, October 5). What is Nature-Deficit Disorder?. *Richard Louv*.

<http://richardlouv.com/blog/what-is-nature-deficit-disorder/>.

Malchiodi, C. A. (2005). Expressive therapies: History, theory, and practice. *Expressive Therapies*, 1-15.

Miles, B. [Beau Miles]. (2021, March 6). *The Commute: Walking 90km to work*. [Video].

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-Zyud8xh2c&ab_channel=BeauMiles.

National Park Service. (2021, February 25). *Visitation numbers*.

<https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/visitation-numbers.htm>.

Naor, L., & Mayseless, O. (2020). The therapeutic value of experiencing spirituality in nature. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 7(2), 114–133.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000204>.

Nordin-Bates, S. M. (2020). Striving for perfection or for creativity?: A dancer's dilemma. *Journal of Dance Education*, 20(1), 23.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2018.1546050>.

Oz, F. (Director). (2020). *Derek DelGaudio's In & Of Itself*. [Documentary Film]. In *And Of Itself* Film, LLC.

Park, B. J., Tsunetsugu, Y., Ishii, H., Furuhashi, S., Hirano, H., Kagawa, T., & Miyazaki, Y.

(2008). Physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the atmosphere of the forest) in a mixed forest in Shinano Town, Japan. *Scandinavian Journal of Forest Research*, 23(3),

278-283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02827580802055978>.

Rumi, J. M. (n.d.). The Guest House. Retrieved April 30, 2021 from:

<https://allpoetry.com/poem/8534703-The-Guest-House-by-MawlanaJalaluddin-Rumi>.

Todesco, T. (2003). Healing through wilderness. *Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, 19(3), 90-104. The Trumpeter.

<http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/83/83>.

Sammy Rae & The Friends. (2021). Living room floor [Song]. On *Let's throw a party* [Album]. Flux Studios, NYC.

Suh, H., Gnilka, P. B., & Rice, K. G. (2017). Perfectionism and well-being: A positive psychology framework. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 111, 25–30.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.01.041>.

Westlund, S. (2015). 'Becoming human again': Exploring connections between nature and recovery from stress and post-traumatic distress. *Work*, 50(1), 161-174.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3233/WOR-141934>.

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). "Ego distortion in terms of true and false self". *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc: 140–57.

Winnicott, D.W. (2002). *Winnicott on the child*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group.

World Health Organization. *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International*

Classification of Diseases. (2019, May 28). Retrieved April 14, 2021 from

<https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>.

Appendix A

Writing Process Journal Entries:

Spring 2021

Process Journal Entry 1

Let go, Love. Lose control

1/27/21 - It started with the prompt, “explore artistically an evolving view of yourself as an expressive therapist.” I entered processing with an image in mind but abandoned that as soon as I noticed frustration and negative self-talk. I chose an approach I was comfortable with and it brought me to a much more peaceful place, but I did not feel complete when I stopped hours later. I went outside on snowy day and looked around for materials and inspiration. Starting sticking flowers that a friend gave me to the canvas, I eventually moved to the extracted moss I found outside. I used it as an alternative to brushes, and I liked the feeling of being less in control. I researched facts about moss and reflected on these new findings. It was used to dress wounds in WWI, it can measure air pollution, it can nourish other plants.



Process Journal Entry 2

2/2/21 - Processing with a photo walk brought up my confidence fluctuation during the writing process. I'm currently finding resistance in this journey because of the trouble I have always had with articulating myself. To honor this, I've engaged here in the context of overwhelming stimuli. I'm attempting to foster a new type of relationship to the subject matter. How can I transform the thought pattern regarding creativity from "a thing to be good at" to "a thing to feel good doing?" Where did all of these unreasonable expectations to be more than enough come from? Where is the off switch for perfection?



Process Journal Entry 3

Home

2/10/21 - I'm reflecting on the question of what it looks like to heal after loss. One word stuck with me the most, home. Home fills me with the comfort I used to feel when sinking into my mom's lap as a sad toddler or sprinting into my dad's arms when he got home from work. Home is Connecticut, but home is also me. My truest form sits in comfort and grows in lack thereof. "I am in my own lane/I will not let myself down/ am in my own place/I am my own house" (Sammy Rae & The Friends, 2021). I continue to work on building a strong foundation to hold me up when the world around me is crumbling. There is always room to rebuild, and I am always inviting guests in, like Rumi so easily states in the poem *The Guest House* (Rumi, n.d.).



Process Journal Entry 4

Hello Goodbye

2/22/21 - This photograph was taken by my mom while I've been spending time at home recently. We had just gotten back from Grandpa's funeral and she picked up her camera to capture the male and female cardinals at the feeder. She believed it's a sign from him that he's doing okay. Today's journey to mass was my first in years. The sermon was beautiful and unlike one I've ever heard before. He talked about how eternal life still involves companionship with those still living, that moving on just means connecting differently with the Earth. Personally, I think this connection lies in nature and nonhuman forms. Comfort with death is often celebrated in nature. Not only can we connect to other forms, but we can also normalize the circle of life.

2/22/21

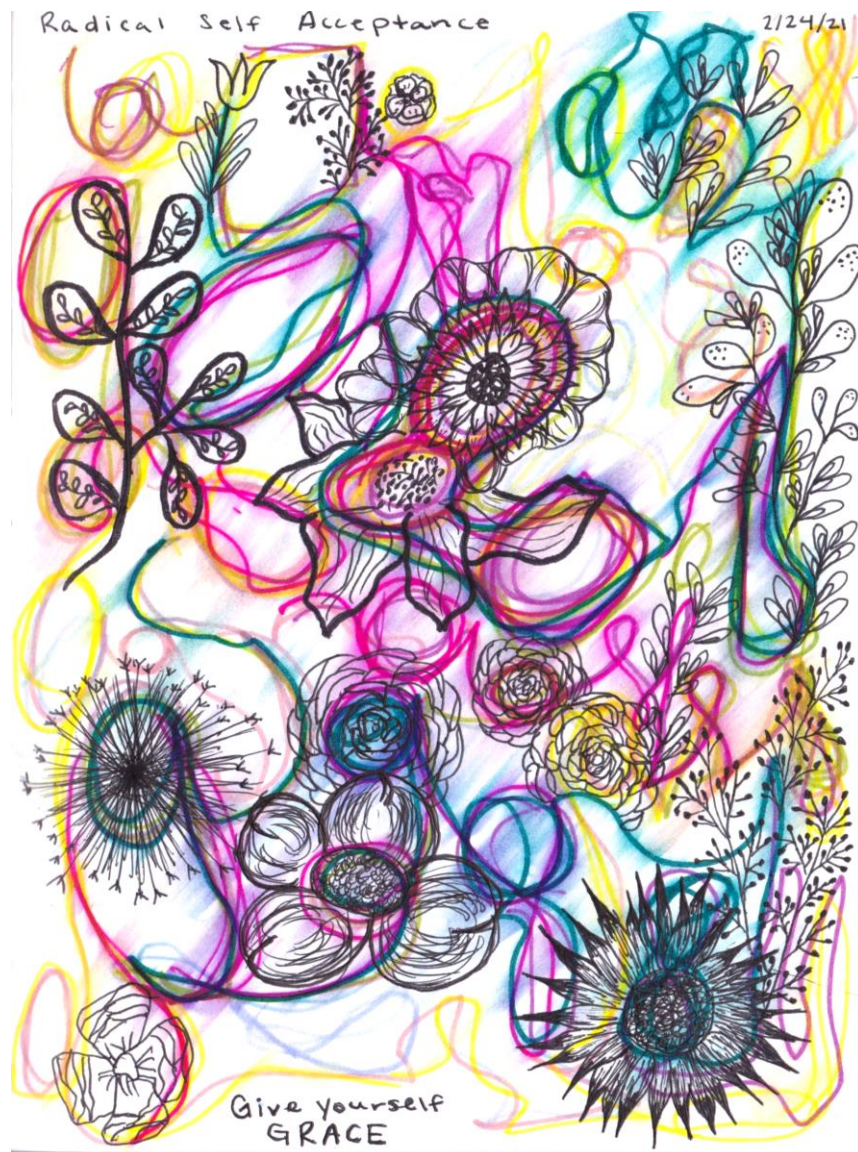
Hello Goodbye



Process Journal Entry 5

Radical Self-Acceptance

2/25/21 - My brain feels a bit like this page right now. Circles all intertwined and overlapped, imperfect, and asymmetrical. The flowers poke out and make their way to the surface to be noticed as a primary component in all the mess. The beauty is found in the imperfections, the incompleteness, the discovery. A classmate tells me to give myself grace. I am to call in more of it because, ultimately, it is me. Forgiveness, ease, prayer.



Process Journal Entry 6

Backpacking the Appalachian Trail

3/19/21 – I felt prepared until I didn't, on the first mile of the night hike. We began at 10pm and I started like all inexperienced folks do... way too fast. I was on a bit of a high at the thought of spending time immersed in nature after months of staring into a computer screen 12 hours a day. Everything hurt. I was breaking in new muscles just like on my bike ride. Finally, we get to the camp site. I was pissed. Everyone was having a grand time. How in the world was no one sharing this pain with me? They were familiar with the pain, just like how I know what the last 100 ft of a climb on my bike feels like. This felt like worst thing in the world. I was anxious wreck, got 45 minutes of sleep on night one, and I was still ill-prepared for two 9-mile days. I tried so hard to focus on nature around me, the sound of silence, the bigger picture. Self-defeating thoughts flooded my brain, feeling trapped, angry, and wanting to give up. It was a synonymous feeling to that of being home sitting in my living room staring at my computer screen.



Process Journal Entry 7

Full Circle

3/21/21 - Now this is what it feels like to enjoy the morning after a long hike. As soon as I emerged from my warm cocoon, I was surprisingly ready for another 9 miles. I knew more this morning. I knew about our route and how the first 3 miles would be the only elevation of the day, about how my body would feel, and most of all that I would be sleeping in my own bed tonight. This all helped but didn't completely eliminate my anxiety. Little did I know that the real challenge would be descending. I was filled with rage as my hunger set in. Sarah and I chatted most of the day and her poise and soft voice helped calm my racing thoughts and frustrations. While talking to her, I realized why people like this backpacking stuff. They are putting themselves into the uncomfortable, into the imperfect, into simplicity. They let go of the idea standards and expectations and focus on only the necessities. It's hard to be critical about anything when your first priority is to just survive. This is exactly how I felt on 4k when my anxiety walked away because I was no longer focusing on the unknown, the unsaid, the uncomfortable. Then nature puts it all into perspective. Nature is powerful and scary and unpredictable, putting you into a vulnerable position. Yet, it has restorative components. Nature is both a challenger and a healer, like an old wise man teaching a lesson for you to take with you on your journey. Then as soon as the journey is complete, you forget about all the pain and the lessons are what stick. This big realization is what I'm trying to translate in my paper. The bottom half of this journey was glorious. Walking away from the mountain we climbed and transitioning back into reality while we trudged through town felt like cloud nine. I basked in the sun for the first time this year, let my feet breathe and my lungs repair. It felt so rewarding to

hold this accomplishment in my hands. I was ready to take this feeling and let it fuel me all the way to the end of my graduate school journey.



Appendix B

4k for Cancer Journal Entries

Summer 2019

Process Journal Entry 1

6/2/2019 (Day 1/70)- We shouted our ritual cheer, said our goodbyes, and all at once dipped our back tires into the Baltimore harbor. This marks the start of our journey, as we leave behind our home, our family, our comfort. Here I am. Pushing 75% mentally prepared. I won't get to 100. Does anyone ever really get to 100? When we arrive in San Francisco, we will dip our front tires into the Pacific Ocean to mark the finish of a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was time to let go and grow out of my familiarity. We clipped in and rolled off into the sunrise. At mile 50, back pain overthrew my mental game. The first challenge. "This too shall pass" echoed in my thoughts. I don't feel strong enough.



Process Journal Entry 2

6/5/2019 (Day 3/70) - The Appalachian Mountains, Pennsylvania. These climbs were by far the most physically taxing moments of activity I've ever had to work through. This journey is teaching me so much about myself. I pushed myself to tears and could barely speak, breathe, or drink. My mind, body, and spirit managed to hold up despite the agony. I pushed and I pushed, working with my emergency 100th wind, the last possible pinches of energy over each hill that never felt like they'd never end. When we got lost, I cried and asked myself a hundred times over why the hell I signed up for something like this. I tell myself over and over that I'm not prepared enough, but the funny part is, no one else is either. We can't help but laugh at ourselves.

Process Journal Entry 3

6/12/19 (Day 11/70) – Columbus, Ohio. Each day gets physically easier but mentally harder. I keep saying to strangers that this entire thing is 90% head and 10% body. I'm definitely in better shape than when I first started, but each day is a new mental game that I have to push through in order to make it to the morning. I feel like I am leaning a lot into myself by intentionally listening to what my body is telling me. I realize how far I can push it until I reach my threshold, and how much more I can add to that. I've proven to myself that I can make it this far and nothing can come between me and the finish line. I'm heartbroken and heavy with loss, but when my head hits the floor, I'm grateful, no matter how challenging the day is. I'm growing, I'm embracing the uncomfortable, and I'm surviving through it. That is strength I've never seen in myself before.

Process Journal Entry 4

6/30/19 (Day 29/70) – Omaha, Nebraska. In the midst of all that is happening, I find home in lots of things. As much as it hurts to think about sometimes, home is still comfort. Feeling even the slightest bit of comfort in a completely strange place eases my pain and reminds me to smile. These lands have surprised me in their fullness. Butterflies are everywhere and when we disrupt their peace, they all fly up into the air behind us. Butterflies remind me of when my sister used to give me butterfly kisses as a little one before bed. I pick up a heart-shaped rock and put it in my pocket, they remind me that my mom is always with me. We pass golf courses that I pretend my dad is playing on, knowing he's in his element. The vinyl listening room where nothing seemed to matter but the music and the comfort of this rug. We listened to a Bill Evans album and sat in silence for what seemed like hours. My brother would love it here.

Process Journal Entry 5

7/9/19 (Day 38/70) – Boulder, Colorado. We have reached an end to the seemingly endless Midwest section of the States. It's been hot, buggy, and FLAT, but I'm a sucker for the long, quiet days. Wheat and grass blow like an illusion in the wind. Valleys dip low in between each of the corn fields that stretch for miles. The cows wade in mucky ponds and stare us down as we pass by, with full judgement that we are the ones that look ridiculous. The hills are long, the mirage in the distance creates a desert-like visual aesthetic. Stopping will attract the flies, there aren't many opportunities to feel comfortable. Passing through the next milestone (Colorado state line) came and went quickly. As we rode on, trees replaced hay bales and tailwind pushed us to our next destination. Music rang in our ears and the clouds erupted in front of our eyes. After a long day, we just wanted to keep going out of pure adrenaline. I feel limitless.

Process Journal Entry 6

7/11/19 (Day 40/70) – Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. One second, we see an endless open road and the next, boom; the mountains are just there slapped right in front of us like a bumper sticker. A part of me eagerly wants to climb them and another part of me just wants to just stay here in comfort forever. We climbed through the mountains, weaving and winding in and around each switchback like a small cheerio floating in a giant bowl of cereal, making friends with river rapids and wildflowers popping out of cracks in massive rock walls. My knees hurt but the pain was but a sliver of distraction from what view met my eyes. I wrote “look up” on my thighs to serve as a reminder of why this was worth it. 6 hours later, we were 12,183 ft up and there was only one way down, to make like a bird and fly. The descent was like a dream, I got to the bottom and couldn’t tell if the tears were from the wind, the bugs, or simply just awe.



Process Journal Entry 7

7/24/19 (Day 53/70) – Cedar City, Utah. I hit a serious obstacle after breaking my wrist last week, my first broken bone. I'm risking a lot by continuing through this, but one I'm more than willing to take if it means finishing what I started. 4 days and 2 specialists later, I'm back in the saddle and certainly rusty. I feel a little like how I did on day 1, getting used to the exertion and how to keep up in the most efficient ways. It's incredible challenging and most days I'm frustrated with the lack of mobility, my energy is depleted, and there isn't a single bike store guru who thinks I won't need surgery. Through it all, I'm attempting to remain positive and move forward with a smile smacked on my face because I'm alive, I got this far, and I'm not stopping now. The support from my team, my closest friends, and my family are a major reason I got here and the only reason I plan to keep on going.

Processing Journal Entry 8

8/10/19 (Day 70/70) – San Francisco, California. 70 days, 4,000 miles, \$7,400 raised, a broken wrist, a broken bike, and at times a broken heart. I wouldn't trade a single bit of it for the world. Biking across America taught me invaluable lessons, given me thousands of reasons to cry and a thousand more to smile. I am stronger here than I was a pale, baby-faced little one in the Baltimore Harbor. Honestly, I'd probably live many more days sleeping on the floor, suffocating

in the wet and dry heat, being knocked out of my saddle by wind, and playing the harmonica while stranded on the side of the road just to feel this euphoria once more.



THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Expressive Arts
Therapy**

Student's Name: Marissa Aldieri

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: How Nature Calls in a More Secure Sense of Self in the Face of Perfectionism: An Expressive Arts Therapy Journey to Self-Identity

Date of Graduation: May 22, 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Ara Parker *Ara Parker*