

THE PEDAGOGY OF NATURE:  
TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON MEANINGS MADE  
WITH/IN OUTDOOR SPACES

By

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**We live by stories, we also live in them...living the stories planted in us early or along the way... living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.**

**Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free***

No other quote in this study better encapsulates my journey. I once lived in stories that did more at times to negate and diminish than they did to lift up or empower. When I became a mother, my stories began to change. Life gifted me with three beautiful children whose strength, beauty, and resiliency urged me to discover these qualities in myself. As I marveled at their strength, I myself became stronger. Their resiliency fostered the same in me. This doctoral journey has been a manifestation of the inspiration that filled me as I watched them do hard things and blossom into the kind of humans the world needs. Alex, Ryan, and Cassidy, being a part of your stories is the greatest honor of my life.

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Title of Study: THE PEDAGOGY OF NATURE: TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON  
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Abstract: The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to 'come alongside' women educators who value and therefore spend extended periods of time outdoors to consider how they story those experiences and events, and, in doing so, to illuminate what their stories reveal about the influences of those experiences their worldviews, views of self, and educational paradigms.

Coming alongside six experienced educators ages 42-66, I entered dialogically into the stories of their experiences outdoors. Compelled by my emic perspective as a woman educator who also values spending time in nature, I offer substantial autobiographical reflections on my experiences. I used concepts from John Dewey's philosophy of experience to examine narrators' experiences through stories and my autobiographical passages first individually, then across cases to find commonalities.

The seven major themes which arose across accounts of their experiences were: 1) Narrators' stories revealed that past events inform their perceptions of the present and future; 2) Narrators placed value on going outside to be with others; 3) Narrators valued going outside to be alone; 4) Nature influenced their pedagogical paradigms; 5) Dewey's philosophies of doing and undergoing were manifested in their experiences as two ways of being with and in nature; 6) Their experiences in nature served as a catalyst for narrators to become and/or discover who they are; 7) Narrators storied an ongoing drive to go into nature as a lifelong journey which they valued and pursued.

The findings revealed that experiences in nature can be not only deeply educative, but also serve as a locus of transformative growth and self-understanding. Additionally, outdoor interactions hold empowering potential for teachers (corporeally, emotionally, spiritually, physically). Consistent with Clandinin & Connelly's approach to narrative inquiry, the study concludes with a consideration of "questions worth asking" raised by the study's discoveries.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

**How little note is taken of the deeds of Nature!  
What paper publishes her reports?...  
What record is kept of Nature's colors – the clothes she wears?**

**- John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir***

#### **Escape to the Clover: A Narrative Exemplar**

The backyard was my world. It was all that I knew of outside, but I loved it for its outsideness. The patchy fescue and exposed slicks of wet earth in that confined space were my kingdom, the pear tree was my castle, and the rusty chain link fence that enclosed it all was the ends of the earth. My throne was a patch of clover in which I sat for hours at a time, head bent low to examine each shade of green on the leaves. I held the clover up in the sunlight, turning it in my hand to expose the different nuances. I counted the greens I saw, and found that I recognized no less than twenty-five greens. The shades shifted lighter and darker, depending upon the angle of the sun and the shadow I cast on the clover patch. They smelled green, so I counted that, too. My first memories of home were in those outdoor spaces, rather than inside, and transitioning to school required a sudden and unwelcome extraction from the safety of that place.

“She won’t want to be called DeeDee when she’s an adult.” My kindergarten teacher looked over the rim of her reading glasses at my parents on enrollment day, her sharply-raised eyebrow communicating a clear disapproval of my parents’ choice for their daughter’s nickname. “She will go by her given name, Glenda, starting today. When she’s an adult, she’ll be grateful for this change.” She didn’t offer to discuss it further. I was to be called Glenda. I had never been called Glenda before that day. I wasn’t even aware I had another name until that moment.

“Glenda is slow to respond to my requests.” The notes began to come home in the first week of school. I didn’t mean to respond slowly, but I didn’t know who Glenda was. I missed my dog and my backyard and my swing set, and I missed my name. My parents had passively accepted the teacher’s directive, assuming she knew best. I was therefore compelled to acclimate to my teacher’s foreign way of summoning my attention that year. Nevertheless, I stole away to the sanctuary of my backyard the moment I returned home each day, to the solace of my swing set and my pear tree and my soft, damp clover, and my floppy-eared, overweight beagle. With them I was still DeeDee.

Shifting from half day kindergarten to being an all-day first grade student meant first and foremost that I would have less time than ever in my backyard. The first week of school, my teacher subjected the other students and I to a battery of tests she referred to as “SRA’s,” though I never knew what that stood for. The second week of school I was told I would no longer attend reading class with my peers, but would instead be taken to the fourth-grade class for reading. Painfully shy and prone to cry with only the slightest provocation, I had no desire to leave my classroom. There are childhood memories that fade, and some that remain as sharp and pointed as that day — the royal blue carpet, the hand on my shoulder, the click-click-click of my

teacher's high-heeled shoes as we stepped onto the bright white tile floor of the fourth-grade classroom, all alight in unnatural fluorescent blues.

Twenty-five faces turned to look quizzically at me as I was shown to my seat, hand still on my shoulder, in an empty chair of the reading circle next to the teacher and handed a book I had never seen. The bodies around me were giants, large and thick, with unkind eyes. Without explanation, the teacher read the opening sentence of the book, then each student to the right took a turn reading one sentence. The sound of the voices moved around the circle, each time one turn closer to me. My heart began to pound against my ears. I couldn't get air into my lungs. My eyes glanced down at the passage, and as was their habit, began to glide across the words. For a moment, my attention swept away into the unfolding story and the giants around me faded into dimness.

"Glenda? Glenda, would you read the next sentence for us, please?" My cheeks ignited as I realized she was saying the name I had been assigned. She was talking to me. It was my turn to read out loud. I had no idea which sentence was supposed to be mine. I had gotten lost in the story. I looked around in horror at the faces that were waiting for me to speak. I looked back at the book, but could not see the words through the tears bubbling on my eyelids. The greatest effort I had ever exerted to not cry seemed only to push the tears out in an explosive wail, and I began to bawl so loudly I could hear it echoing off the tile floor.

The hand was once again on my shoulder, the click-click-click of my teacher's shoes ricocheting off the ceiling and walls. This time, I was ushered into the library. My teacher whispered for a few moments with the librarian, then leaned down, looked at me, and frowned. Her experiment had been an abject failure, and now she didn't quite know what to do with me. More whispering with the librarian.

“Glenda, instead of going to the fourth-grade classroom, you’re going to spend the reading hour here with Ms. Brown.” I looked at the librarian, who was clearly displeased with the development. My teacher leaned down to make sure I was listening. “Ms. Brown will help you find books on your level that interest you.” Click-click-click-click-click. She was gone again.

I looked at Ms. Brown, who had gone back to doing whatever it was she had been doing. She seemed to have already forgotten I was there. My breathing was jagged from crying in the fourth-grade classroom. I didn’t trust my voice to form words, so I stood there and looked down at the floor until my teacher returned and shuttled me back to class.

The other first graders didn’t know where I had been, but they could tell something awful must have happened. Their curious faces were only slightly less terrifying than the ones I encountered in the fourth-grade classroom. They were discussing the colors. There was a picture of a red shirt and blue pants. There was another picture of a tree next to a school building.

“And what color is the shirt?” My teacher asked. Hands went up. I raised mine as well. She called on someone else.

“Red, and the pants are blue.” My teacher smiled. “Good. Let’s read the word: R-E-D.”

“And what color is the tree?” Was it a trick question? Didn’t she know it was more than one color? Again, hands went up. I raised my hand as well. She called on someone else.

“Brown,” another girl said.

“And?” My teacher said. “What else do we see?” I raised my hand high. “Glenda?”

“Greens.” I said. Kids snickered and looked at me. In hindsight, I suspect it wasn’t as awful as it seemed in the moment, but I was fresh from the stinging of the fourth-grade classroom, and the tears were only just dry. I felt my face flash hot.

“Green, yes,” my teacher said, graciously covering what she must have considered to be the understandable mistake of an early learner.

At recess I retreated at once to the safety of the clover patch in the far corner of the playground. It was cool and damp and smelled like my backyard. The sun split through the branches of the trees above and illuminated the variegated streaks on the deep green leaves of clover. I bent down to examine them closely, and there they were: the greens (figure 1). Though I had scarcely begun my academic journey, I was already becoming aware that in scrutinizing the nuances of the clover, I had learned ways of naming that didn’t necessarily conform to— or pass muster with —the norms at work in this place called school. I had been in the presence of two teachers that day, and in that instance found that nature had produced the more compelling lesson.

Outside was my sanctuary, I realized. A kingdom of clover. A kingdom of greens. This was my safe place, a place of learning and discovery where there were no unkind faces. There was surely a four-leaf clover somewhere, streaked and alive with all the greens, and I would sit there in my kingdom at recess each day, looking for it. Maybe I could find and show it to my teacher so she could learn.

**Figure 1.** *Greens.* (University of Maryland, 2020).



Every morning for the rest of that year, I was shuttled down the hall to the library during the reading hour. Once it became clear that Ms. Brown had no intention of acknowledging my presence, I realized I could wander around the library freely. There were ten million books, I figured. I wondered if there would be time to read them all before the school year ended. The library became a welcome oasis, bright with sunlight and high ceilings of blond wooden beams. It exuded a rich, dusty, intoxicating smell I found magical. There was a small sunny patch of royal blue carpeting under a large picture window which looked out onto my clover field in the playground, just one glass panel away from outside. The magical fragrance of the books permeated the small patch of carpet and the walls and the window, and beckoned me to stay.

I consumed one book after another lying in the sunny spot on the bright blue carpet that year. I traveled to Narnia (Lewis, 1994) and an island of blue dolphins (O'Dell, 1960). Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy were my friends, and together we fought the White Witch (Lewis, 1994). I hid away in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Koningsburg, 1967) and traveled through tesseracts to distant worlds (L'Engle, 1962). In between books, I pored through the collection of National Geographic magazines and learned that the world was much grander than I could ever have realized. There were greens and blues and golds I had never imagined. There were steppes, and Silk Roads, and salt seas. The chain link fences surrounding my backyard and my school were not the ends of the earth after all. If attending nature's lesson of the clover had yielded deeper understandings, what might attention to other wonders of nature bring? There was more I needed to see.



Considering events of my childhood such as these in retrospect, the seminal beginnings of a self drawn to the outdoors emerges. This and other narratives of my life illuminate pivotal moments which fed my love of outdoor places. In examining my lived experiences retrospectively, previously-disparate moments connect. As I weave together the memories of moments spent outside throughout my life, patterns, trajectories, and influential forces illuminate. There are many stories I tell from my life, some which have informed this study, of time spent with/in nature and its impact on my understandings of who/how I am.

This piecing together of fragmentary moments as a storied whole allows for a uniquely-nuanced gaze on layers of self which have been forged at least in part by influential moments in nature. Additionally, my process of storying uncovers threads and themes: the struggle of navigating an existence which continually pulls one back inside; the pleasure in being outside; the nuances and depth which come from observing the natural world; the challenges of being a woman outdoors; the potential role of nature as teacher; and continual invitations to learn more. By illuminating such themes, I make meaning through which I understand myself, my role as a woman and a teacher, and the world in which I live. Such storying opens wide the potential for narrative inquiry research, which this study employs, and which I will discuss at length below.

### **Research Puzzle (Background to the Study)**

Whereas traditional social science research takes on a formalized problem, narrative inquiry ventures into different qualitative terrain, launching forth from a process Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as a research puzzle, rather than a research problem. Narrative inquiries are born of a “wonder” (p. 124) which oftentimes has its roots in autobiographical soil (p. 41), as does this study. As the researcher thinks narratively about a particular phenomenon, a puzzle forms. The inquirer then “searches and re-searches” narratively to seek out deeper

understanding of the given phenomenon (p. 124). Engaging with scholarship can aid the narrative researcher in thinking through the puzzle.

The research puzzle I investigated for this study began as I considered experiences in which I interacted sensorially with/in nature to co-create deep, impactful meaning that was both educative and transformative, shaping my sense of self in myriad ways. As a student in/of nature's space, I have become one whose storied life reflects nature's spiritually, emotionally, and physically transformative power. As others have noted of their experiences (Adden, 2016; Coble, 2003; Friedley, 2019; Raffan, 1993), learning with/in nature has had profound influence on my ability to think critically and unconventionally, to love with greater acceptance and understanding, and to exhume a version of self-at-peace from layers of decay generated by technological addiction and urban frenzy.

I moved to Stillwater in the fall of 2016 to begin my studies at Oklahoma State University, but the move had a much more widespread impact on my life than I had anticipated. In Stillwater, I met and befriended a group of women who were also educators and who also valued communing with/in nature. As I grew to know them better and participate with them in various outdoor activities, I observed that, like me, they also seemed to find meaning and deep understandings of self through time spent with nature. We discussed the value we had each ascribed to observing the elements of nature step by step while hiking on a trail, or mile by mile, as we pedaled a bicycle. We discussed the moments when observing nature seemed to slow time and imbue deep-seated contentment and mindfulness. It became increasingly salient to my own understanding of myself as a woman and as an educator to consider the possible intersections between my own experiences in nature and theirs; and to seek a richer understanding of ways in which others' narratives of their outdoor experiences might shed light on their sense of self as



teachers and women. What stories might they tell from their childhoods which shifted their trajectories outdoors? Conversely, what forces may tether them to the indoors? Have forces worked against them passively or actively because they are women as they journeyed outdoors? What lessons might they have learned from nature, and how did they learn them? What meanings might they have made of events in nature, and how might their own retrospective narrations of such events inform who they see themselves to be as teachers?

Adding further to the puzzle, as a researcher who embraces the complexity and situatedness of narrative (Clandinin, 2013), I understand that my storying and that of other women teachers is contextually situated within what Clandinin (2013) describes as the “three-dimensional narrative” space of temporality, sociality, and place (p. 39), elements which I will explain in detail in Chapter III. My own narratives reveal the weight of ballasts such as culture, audience, and a host of other factors whose presence potentially alter the stories I tell, and I wonder to what degree their stories might do the same.

Additionally, my research at OSU turned toward scholarship which propelled my personal and interpersonal speculations onto a wider stage. Literature suggests that many people ascribe value and a wide variety of meanings to time spent with/in nature: it is credited as a catalyst for heightened self-esteem (Mitten, 1992) and spiritual empowerment (Henderson, 1996), as well as a generator of physical vitality (Ryan et al., 2010). Similarly, the long-lasting value ascribed to outdoor places surfaces when researchers invite people to share stories of their lives. When asked to name important or memorable places from their childhoods, for example, adults in one study overwhelmingly listed an outdoor place (Wells, 2000). Literature suggests a correlation between children’s exposure to natural elements within and near the home and specifically “greenness” to improved cognitive functioning (Wells, 2000, p. 790), giving

scholarly support to a connection between nature and learning for others. Investigating further, I discovered studies exploring risk/uncertain outcomes of outdoor adventure for women and its meaning in participants' lives (Boniface, 2006).

Studying literature which considered various effects of activities in nature for these populations enhanced my research puzzle. An examination which considered a nuanced relationship between women educators, their time with/in nature, and the potentially-affectual role of the stories which result, however, remained a puzzle.

### **Narrative Inquiry as Methodology: Narrative Beings**

As the potential importance of a study which considered women educators communing with/in nature began to emerge, I grappled with which qualitative methodology would best elucidate the delicate layers of meaning that might arise. After studying various qualitative methodologies at some length, I found that narrative inquiry was an ideal avenue through which to conduct such a study. Narrative inquiry offered me a way to delve dialogically into the stories of experienced women-teachers through the interviewing process and provide space for the nuances those stories would elicit. Narrative inquiry has a long, diverse history as a way of understanding the world (e.g. Bruner, 1986), and as a research approach (e.g. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016; Reissman, 2008). Narrative inquiry has diversified, giving place to examining stories through varied lenses and for different purposes. Because narrative inquiry is not as well-known as other qualitative methodologies used in conventional social science, however, I have chosen to introduce it quite early in this dissertation, partially unpacking it from the outset to aid the reader. I then expound upon it at greater length in Chapter III.

From the perspective of many narrative researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 2008), narratives are building blocks of culture. Humankind are narrative beings who

structure their lives through stories, interpreting their pasts and understanding who they are through them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). On the broader stage, Indigenous peoples, generations of families, organizations, and communities narrate stories to make meaning and to preserve and pass on cultural understandings and wisdom. Stories take on the structure and norms of their communities, and thus stories influence and are influenced by culture.

As narrative beings, we know and grow and become in the world through stories of our experiences, stories which serve as frameworks for our understanding. As individuals and groups, we exist in, move through, and understand the world through collaborative narratives we co-create with others, our environment, our past selves, and our cultures. Further, we assume identities for ourselves, our families, and our social groups based on our experiences and the meaning we make through the stories we tell of those experiences.

D. Jean Clandinin, whose model of narrative inquiry this study followed, writes that narrative inquiry is at its root, the study of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Within this methodology, the word “experience” itself is a heavily theorized term with very particular meanings. First, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) hold that “experience happens narratively,” and therefore, it is natural to study it narratively (p. 19). Secondly, they write that experience, and the resulting narration of experience, is itself the phenomenon under study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, a goal of narrative inquiry is to engage in narrative with storying “alongside” others (Clandinin, 2006, p. 48), considering what is said, why it is said, and from which contextual bases those words might have arisen.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also argue that a “grand social narrative” of inquiry is often reductive of experience (p. 19). By this they mean that inquiry which favors one or only a few governing norms limits their ability as researchers to search for, consider, or allow alternate

realities to have a place in their work; this in turn limits their readership as well. Therefore, in their view, narrative inquiry favoring local interpretations may engender a fuller, richer, more nuanced understanding of experience. These characteristics of narrative inquiry fit well into the scheme of a study focused on the stories of women educators. As the researcher, I engaged in storying with other educators and together looked for themes and meanings within the narratives which tied to this inquiry's purpose of illuminating what our individual and then collective stories revealed about our understandings of nature's influences upon our worldviews, views of self, and our educational philosophies and/or practices.

Additionally, Clandinin posits that experience is always contextually situated (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) in what Clandinin has labeled the "commonplaces" of temporality, sociality, and place; conditions under which researchers study experience through a "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieu" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Specifically, according to Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry, experience is temporally situated: peoples' telling of an event is influenced by growth, transformation, and other experiences the teller has undergone since the original event took place. As one changes over time, so too do her stories. Similarly, stories are situated socially; cultural, institutional, familial, and other social phenomena press in and exert force on stories, shaping and coloring them (Clandinin, 2013). Lastly, place-based contextuality has ballast in narrative as well: both the location in which an event takes place and the place of the storytelling influences what a narrator says, how she says it, and why.

Contextual situatedness of experience is therefore a phenomenon which allows the research to explore not only the personal import of an individual's experience, but also to

consider the larger historical, familial, social, and cultural contexts inside which that individual narrative resides.

[T]he focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals' experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. Narrative inquirers study the individual's experience in the world, an experience that is storied both in the living and telling, which they study by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing, and interpreting texts (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42–43).

In this way, narrative research enables layers of meaning making and connection, casts its focus in concentric circles of storying and interpreting, looking alternately at personal understandings, interpersonal meaning making, and broader societal contexts. Following this model, my study used my own narratives as a point of departure and initial understanding; from there I was able to “come alongside” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 48) the other narrators of the study. To Clandinin, coming alongside in narrative inquiry means entering the participant's world in some manner and engaging in extended and meaningful storying with her. Although the participants and I shared experiences prior to the study, during the study we came alongside one another through the methods of interviews and photo elicitation to understand their experiences in nature. The teachers and I wove together richly-nuanced unfoldings of lived experiences and pondered and shared cohesive strands. In the later analysis of the data, I illuminated and examined the ballast of larger cultural and social elements which may have previously been obscured. I discuss narrative inquiry and my interview and photo-elicitation methods in greater detail in Chapter III.

These complicating elements worked to form this multifaceted research puzzle: There was a plethora of literature which has examined teachers' use of outdoor spaces in their role as teachers (Deaton & Hardin, 2014; Goodling, 2016; Mayes, 2011; Nicol, 2012), or which focuses upon outdoor education per se, and ways in which educators might best carry out that instruction (Lozano Lopez, 2018; Thorburn & Marshall, 2014). There was a paucity of literature, however, focused on teachers who journey outside in search of their own personal growth and learning, and which may also shape their educational paradigms. There was a need for deeper scholarly inquiry into teachers' storied accounts of their time spent communing with/in nature to enrich our understanding of themes such as emotional, physical, and/or spiritual connections to nature which their stories may elucidate, and how those experiences and their resulting narratives may affect teachers' personal or pedagogical paradigms.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to come alongside women educators who value and therefore spend extended periods of time in nature to consider their experiences and how they story those experiences and events. Additionally, this study sought to illuminate what our stories revealed about the influences of those experiences in nature on our worldviews, views of self, and educational paradigms.

This research extends the body of knowledge on the empowering potential of outdoor interactions for teachers (corporeally, emotionally, spiritually, physically); it offers a more meaningful understanding of how, as teachers, these stories might flow into others' lives, such as students, family, and friends, and to what effect; and it illuminates the contextual situatedness (Huber & Clandinin, 2005) of teachers who spend time with/in nature to the larger circles of place, temporality, and sociality, therefore linking these individual narratives with the broader

conversation of teacher well-being. It further illuminates the embodied learning processes which nature can offer and considers how those at times differ from the inside, absent-body learning processes of many traditional educational settings.

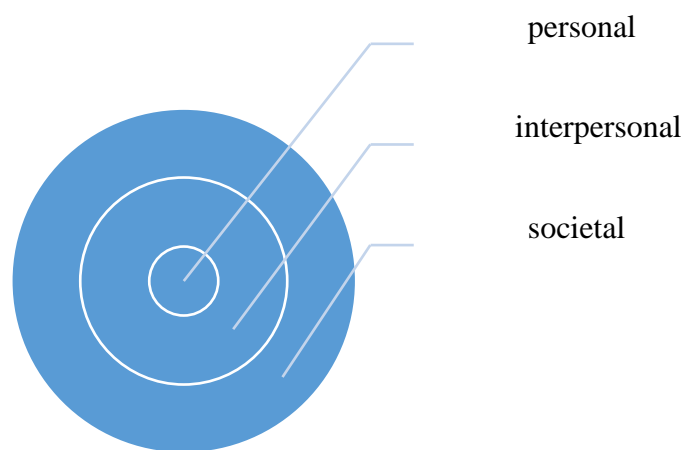
### **Epistemology, Theoretical Perspective, and Theoretical Framework**

This study was situated within a constructionist epistemology, based upon the idea that humans co-construct knowledge with the world as they move through it and interact with it, rendering meaningful reality contingent upon human practices in a social context (Crotty, 1998). This study proceeded forth from the stance that I consider women's experiences with nature valuable to explore, as are the stories that result from those experiences (Friedley, 2019). Additionally, following Clandinin's focus on the social, cultural, and temporal situatedness of experience, this narrative inquiry into the experiences of women educators with/in nature was informed by a theoretical perspective of interpretivism, which sets out from the foundation of a realist ontology, but posits that reality only has meaning as human beings interact with, understand and interpret it through our own perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). As a researcher holding a constructionist and interpretivist view, then, I approached my narrative inquiry as a meaning maker who came alongside other educators who themselves make meaning while moving through the world and interacting with others, being influenced by social, cultural, and temporal contexts that surround us. Through a constructionist and interpretivist lens, I looked for and examined the meaningful interpretations the narrators and I made within this contextual situatedness. As we have undergone experiences in diverse places and settings, these meanings have evolved, shifted, and metamorphized, adding layers and nuances in meaning which also manifested in our stories. As I interpreted these nuances in this study, I again made new meaning from their narratives.

Philosopher John Dewey’s theories on continuity of experience, doing, and undergoing which align with Clandinin’s methodology served as a theoretical framework for the design and analysis of this study. Dewey was an influential educational philosopher who described experience as the manner wherein humans interact and engage with the world around them (Dewey, 1998). Dewey posited that experiences have continuity in which “every experience both takes something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1998, p. 27). The epistemological underpinnings, theoretical perspective and framework are considered in greater detail inside Chapter III’s examination of methodology.

### **Inquiry Questions**

**Figure 2** *Concentric circles of meaning-making in narrative inquiry.*



Aligned with the analogy of concentric circles I used above to describe narrative inquiry, my governing inquiry questions were personal, interpersonal, and societal:

1. How do women-teachers experience nature?
2. How do temporality, sociality, and place appear and shape their narratives of outdoor experiences?



3. How do relationships with others in outdoor experiences shape women-teachers' narratives about nature?
4. How have familial inheritances (Goodall, 2005), [explained in Chapter II] shaped their experiences?
5. What are the implications when educators who value communing with/in nature enter classrooms, interact with colleagues, and model their paradigms?

### **Significance of the Study**

In the terrain of narrative inquiry, significance takes on different dimensions than it might in more traditional qualitative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write:

The contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field.

Furthermore, many narrative studies are judged to be important when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research that they permit. This use of narrative inquiry extends the educative linking of life, literature, and teaching. (p. 42)

Further, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posit that a well-written narrative inquiry offers readers “a place to imagine their own uses and applications” (p. 42). The significance of this study, therefore, lies in its potential praxis to generate a “testing of life possibilities” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42) vis-à-vis teachers in outdoor spaces. Engaging with the storied lives of the educators in this study via narrative research held the potential to enrich narrators' personal understandings as we pondered more deeply our engagements with nature. The larger resonance of the study lies in its educative possibilities to illuminate the commonplaces as potential

avenues for stretching our understanding of meaning in nature. It offers opportunities, in turn, to “extend the educative linking of life, literature and teaching” (p. 42) as well. Other populations of teachers may find meaning in journeys into nature as they search for avenues of self-growth.

Additionally, although not a primary goal, this study adds layers of understanding to the existing body of literature on women educators who recreate or spend time outdoors. It elucidates the familial/background stories which are under examined in other research focusing on relationships to the natural world. It offers meaningful connections between previously-disparate threads such as the possible spiritual, physical, and social effects of time in nature and their sense of self as reflexive women and teachers.

### **Role of Researcher**

In this document, the role of the researcher was twofold. I used my own narratives as part of Clandinin’s methodology of narrative inquiry, and also used the storied events of my experiences as a point of departure from which to “come alongside” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34) other teachers to narratively reflect on their own experiences outdoors. My coming alongside other teachers to understand the meanings they have made in nature reflects the assumptions of the interpretivist theoretical perspective which guides this study. Secondly, following Clandinin (2000; 2013), I analyzed the narratives to illuminate ways teachers storied their interpretations of the effects of outdoor interactions (corporeally, emotionally, spiritually, physically), and examined contextual situatedness (place, temporality, and sociality) of teachers who spend time with/in nature, as aligned with this study’s purpose.

### **Summary**

My own narrative of escaping to the clover as a child and of finding nature a patient and able mentor served to introduce both the inquiry approach and focus of my study: engaging in

narrative inquiry with other teachers to better understand the effects of spending extended time with/in nature for them as individuals, as women, and as educators. In this chapter, I introduced and began to unpack elements of D. Jean Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry, and briefly discussed ways in which the aims and processes of narrative inquiry depart from traditional qualitative methodologies. I explain these distinctions further in Chapter III. In this chapter, I also explained and narratively demonstrated that this particular work of narrative inquiry was informed by an interpretivist theoretical perspective, and finds its foundation in John Dewey's (1966) theories of the continuity of experience and doing and undergoing.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **STUDY CONTEXT AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter II, I begin by reviewing the existing literature which pertains to teachers who spend time in outdoor settings. I provide an overview of literature which speaks to the potential benefits of spending time in nature to provide a foundational basis for better understanding themes which may emerge in the data. I examine existing scholarship which has addressed points salient to my inquiry: What has existing research shown regarding time spent in nature by women? How has research elucidated gender as a factor for women who seek to commune with/in nature? How have other scholars illuminated temporality, society, and/or place vis-à-vis women's outdoor experiences? How have researchers examined familial and other interpersonal relationships on women-teachers who spend time in nature?

In the second half of Chapter II, I review literature which sheds further ontological or theoretical light on nuances of storying. I demonstrate these ontological and theoretical nuances in two narrative exemplars and expound upon their place in narrative inquiry.

To find salient literature, I began by looking through academic journals. Then I worked with a university librarian to identify more potentially useful sources. I also conducted keyword searches in online academic databases. I read existing studies in the fields of outdoor education,

wilderness and adventure training, and leisure studies. In examining the research, I sought to gain a better understanding of how existing research has already added to the field of knowledge concerning what time in nature does for women-teachers. Some research does exist which attends to this topic through various lenses. Additionally, considerable research exists which casts a broader net than my particular focus:

1. Some of the existing research focuses on groups of individuals (at times, specifically teachers) who engage in outdoor activities, but does not specifically consider women. Other research focuses on women in nature, but not specifically on teachers. Within this subset is research which sought to better understand the roles nature plays for larger groups or whole populations of people.

2. An entire field of study focuses on outdoor and leisure education and modes and best practices therein. Within this subset, research also focuses at times on the students with whom teachers work, viewing the teachers in their role as facilitators.

In each of these subsets, I found elements which helped to concretize my thinking as I sharpened and streamlined the focus of my study. Here I review literature within these two subsets, and conclude each section by explaining the element(s) within it which informed the narrative inquiry in which I engaged.

### **Literature which Considers Individual and Group Experiences Outdoors**

Literature exists which explores the effects, benefits, challenges, etc. of outdoor experiences on various types of groups or individuals. Literature reviewed here focuses on teachers, irrespective of gender. Other studies consider groups, such as male and female hikers, or indigenous groups. Adden (2016), for example, undertook a narrative inquiry research project which bears some similarity in purpose to my present work. Her goal was to better understand

the meaning teachers find when they engage in learning outdoors. Adden interviewed three men and four women, (Adden did not collect information on age or race), with a range of teaching experience from 10-30 years who participated in a naturalist training course in California. The teachers planned to use their training to begin teaching in or continue teaching in the field of environmental education. She found that although the teachers' opinions, beliefs, and understandings of nature had been re-negotiated throughout their training experience, they were "simultaneously identity forming and identity expressing" (p. 47). By this she means that their previous experiences in nature had led them to the training, and they were expressing that identity throughout the training. Concurrently, they were also forming identities as they continued to learn more about nature, and about themselves as individuals in it. Adden's work informs my research in that she suggests an interconnectedness between the Selves that teachers already see themselves to be which drives them outside and the selves they are becoming as they continue to engage with nature. This provided a salient lens which harmonized with Dewey's theory of continuity and through which I considered nuances of my participants' narratives.

Another study which used an exploratory design and semi-structured interviews of ten men and ten women by Coble et al. (2003) looked at one particular emotion, fear, and its influence on solo hikers, both male and female. Coble's participants listed fears of accidental injury, attack by a wild animal, getting lost, and theft of possessions. While both men and women shared these fears, women felt greater fear than men of being attacked by a man while alone. Coble's study then considered the strategies that solo hikers use to negotiate those fears. Coble et al. found that there were some strategies, such as reasoning through their fears, avoidance of risk, and avoidance of hiking alone, both men and women shared. Women tended to hike in groups rather than alone, as well as to participate in solo hiking closer to home. As

narratives of fear arose dialogically with my participants, it was helpful to consider research such as Coble's.

Investigating a larger population, outdoor educator James Raffan (1993) conducted an ethnographic study of Chipewyan settlement of the Lutsel K'e and the Caribou Inuit from Qamanittuaq, both in Canada. Among the intriguing aspects in his study, Raffan (1993) wrote about the importance and difficulty of understanding another person's "emotive bonds to place" (p. 40). His findings presented four ways that these populations were bonded to and learned from the land. Some of these findings lie outside the scope of my study, but two held great potential. The first was that their emotive bonds to the land and sense of place had a narrative component. They told stories about the land. Raffan (1993) found that the stories they told reinforced their bonds to the land. The second is that their bond to the land included a spiritual attachment. Raffan wrote that these two populations had "in their thinking a sense of divine presence in their encounters with the land," consisted in "great works of the creator," and provided them with a link to the creator (p. 44). The concepts of both emotive bonds and numative (spiritual) attachments to nature struck directly at nature's affective potential that arose as the narrators in my study and I delved dialogically into what nature does for and in them.

### **Literature which Studies Women who Commune in Nature**

Research also elucidated another topic salient to this study: that of gender and the challenges women face outdoors specifically because they are women. Within the literature on the time women spend in nature was a resurfacing thread which illuminated gender roles, biases, and beliefs. Specifically, existing literature considered challenges women face as they teach or commune in an arena laden with masculinized norms. Thus, the literature reviewed in this

section also examined women who hold leadership roles in outdoor education and the concomitant challenges of that role.

Rogers and Rose (2019), for example, conducted narrative research focused upon gendered experiences of women who serve in leadership roles in outdoor leadership in higher education. Using narrative inquiry and a critical feminism framework, they studied six women between the ages of 30 and 40 who identified as White or multiracial, and who additionally identified as lesbian (2), heterosexual (2), queer (1), and bisexual (1). Rogers and Rose found that marginalization of women in male-dominated realms frequently surfaced as a theme in their participants' narratives (p. 40). Additionally, social and historical contexts were illuminated in which men laid claim to outdoor activities as a "boys' club" to which women were unwelcome, certainly in upper echelons of leadership (p. 43). Masculinized norms served to further challenge women who wished to enter the field (p. 45). Such studies shed light on trajectories which surfaced in my study of women teachers who engage in outdoor education. Specifically, because women serving as leaders in outdoor education face sexism, heterosexism, and marginalization, I needed to enter into these topics dialogically with teachers who enter the outdoors as an avocation.

Another study which considers women in outdoor leadership roles did so to advocate for an increased number of women in the field. Employing an ecofeminist lens, Philpott (2017) sought to understand challenges female preservice outdoor educators faced as they progressed through training (Philpott does not provide detailed demographic information on her participants other than gender). Philpott (2017) found that the male-dominated field had generated "[t]estosterone-driven" dominant narratives which defined "successful" educators; female preservice educators felt pressure to perform on a superhuman, competitive levels, and to



“conform or leave” (p. 281). Philpott’s (2017) study illuminated and problematized a phenomenon common in outdoor activity: competitiveness and its tie to pushing one’s self to the edge of physical limits. Philpott concluded with recommendations for female outdoor leaders to bring greater variety to outdoor programs and new ways to connect to nature. Philpott’s study raised a sensitive and important point: To what degree do such gendered examples of competition and extreme physical exertion enter into teachers’ stories of their own personal adventures outdoors? These questions proved a touchstone for deep discussion in this study.

Kaufman, Ewing, Hyle, Montgomery, and Self (2001) examined ideas of gender and in relation to the natural world through the lens of memory work, a feminist methodology which sought to illuminate and interrupt dominant narratives. Contrary to the narrative research I conducted, however, Kaufman et al.’s memory work study considered discrete memories in order to direct thought away from causality and the connections and flow of whole stories. The five women were the participants of their own study, and identified in the research as “European-American, middle class, and var[ied] in sexual identity and spirituality” (Kaufman et al., 2001, p. 360). They each journaled in the third person about their earliest memories of natural elements – air, earth, fire, and water. They found that even from their earliest memories, “gendered patterns of socialization reflecting dominant values related to nature” (Kaufman et al., 2001, p. 359) emerged, such as a belief that humans are distinct from and need to control the natural world. Additionally, the women found that their fathers’ presence was more pronounced in their first recollections of the natural world, while their mothers were more peripheral in those memories. Though they did not delve into the stories of those memories, their research laid a groundwork for the narrators of my study to consider how their familial inheritances and influences regarding the natural world might uncover gendered patterns, memories, and beliefs.

Friedley (2019) conducted a narrative inquiry focused on the stories of six women between the ages of 40 and 60 who had experienced divorce, and who participated in a multiday, nature-based outdoor program which aimed at increasing resiliency. She used narrative inquiry framed within action research. Among Friedley's (2019) research questions was the following: "What elements must we include in a multi-day nature-based program that would encourage the development of resilience in middle-aged divorced women?" (p. 126). Friedley's (2019) study found that participants "identified group themes related to resilience enhancement, including the importance of group demographics, humour, supportive leadership, and a sense of extended community," (p. 127). Friedley's study suggested the importance of considering dialogically the role extended time in nature may play in teachers' views of self, if and how elements such as support, humor, or sense of community may be influential in that area, themes which arose throughout this study.

### **Literature which Focuses on Students, Outdoor Education**

In this section, I examined literature which addressed the pedagogies and methods used in outdoor education, and within that subset, the literature which focuses on student outcomes when employing those methods. Research surrounding this topic tends to consider educators more in the role of facilitators, often peripheral to the study, rather than as the target of investigation. Looking at a study by Nicol (2012), findings suggested an increase in student-based social action and sustainable living after participating in outdoor learning. Rios' (2014) study of learning in nature suggested possible correlations between outdoor study, positive environmental attitudes, and scientific achievement among elementary students. Davidson (2007) analyzed case studies of secondary students which suggested that outdoor education may affect short-term benefits (improved focus, greater problem-solving capability) as well as longer-term, more holistic

dispositions toward learning in general. A quantitative meta-analysis of 13 case studies found that an overwhelming majority of studies on the subject of outdoor education programs report student benefit in social, physical, academic, and psychological dimensions (Becker, Lauterbach, Spengler, Dettweiler, & Mess, 2017). Wattchow and Brown (2011) found that outdoor education among Australian and New Zealand students established a stronger sense of identity with the land and engenders “place-responsiveness” that informs learners’ identities (p. 77).

A study by Thorburn and Marshall (2014) looked at potential theoretical bases for outdoor education. Thorburn and Marshall drew upon the philosophical reflections of Peirce, Heidegger, and Dewey, among other prominent philosophers. In their phenomenological study focused on Scottish students aged 3-18, Thorburn and Marshall (2014) concluded that outdoor learning strengthened connections between the “lived body” and the embodied mind, potentially improving cognition, given the right pedagogical engagements (p. 129). In this instance, Thorburn and Marshall drew on Dewey’s ideas of experience, which informed this study, however, they focused on potential outcomes of outdoor education, rather than upon individual learners or teachers. In an ethnographic study of 25 children in an outdoor school, Lozano Lopez (2018) considered nature-based preschool education and its possible correlation with emotional education. She found that as preschoolers played, interacted, and learned with one another in nature, they formed an “affective bond with nature” which allowed them to become more competent at understanding the complexities of their emotional world (p. 56).

Other research shed light on outdoor education by examining a host of limiting variables called leisure constraints which placed limits on duration, length, location, intensity, and/or quality of an individual's outdoor activities (Ellis & Rademacher, 1986). Researchers in the field of leisure activity grouped these constraints into three broad groups: intrapersonal, interpersonal,

and structural (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Do the intrapersonal, interpersonal issues relate? While some of the conversation surrounding leisure constraints fell outside the purview of this study, it was salient to consider constraints such as fear which shed light on gender issues, issues of temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, 2013) which I discuss at length in Chapter III.

In an ethnographic mixed methods study by Mannion et al. (2013), for example, 18 teachers participated in outdoor excursions and gave their feedback on what Mannion and his collaborators called “place-responsive pedagogy,” or an “explicit efforts to teach by means of an environment with the aim of understanding and improving human-environment relations” (p. 792). Working with educators in early education, primary, and secondary schools (no further demographics were provided), Mannion et al. (2013) found that their participants reported positive feedback, particularly in the realm of peer-to-peer collaboration, mutual support, and “permission to fail” (p. 798). Conversely, participants also reported feeling less competent when teaching outdoors, since they had more experience in teaching indoors. Although Mannion’s study centered around the pedagogical aspects of place-based learning, the transparency and vulnerability study participants share elucidated nuances of being and learning outdoors.

Further investigation led me to a descriptive phenomenological study by Field et al. (2016) which explored the experiences of outdoor education leaders to better understand the commonalities and challenges of individuals who fulfill that role. Researchers interviewed five participants aged 22-32 who led outdoor programs in the Pacific Northwest; no further demographic information on the participants was provided. Among their findings, Field et al. (2016) wrote that participants expressed a greater degree of relational closeness to other members of the outdoor community who understood the nuances of their field. Participants

expressed that at times they felt like friends or family members who had no experience in the field did not understand them well. Another finding dealt with feelings of transition when participants left the field and returned to the “real world” (p. 40). Both findings proved salient to my narrators’ accounts as they engaged dialogically on the topic of challenges they have faced vis-à-vis outdoor activity and feelings of closeness and belonging with others in that realm.

The themes and potential outcomes which emerged from the studies above spoke directly to a study of women educators in nature in raising salient questions about place, relationships, and dispositions toward learning. If outdoor education suggests positive environmental attitudes and holistic dispositions toward learning among students, would time in nature have a similar effect on women teachers? First, social action (Nicol, 2012) was a particularly complicated topic for teachers, particularly P-12 public school teachers who must cautiously navigate the space between privately-held beliefs and the dictates and limits of speech which their job required. It was salient to this study to learn if and how teachers’ time spent with/in nature spurred them to desires for social action, and how that manifested itself in their social and professional spheres.

Additionally, findings in existing research suggested that a heightened sense of environmental literacy and responsibility were worthy to consider dialogically with participants. For example, a study conducted by Lugg (2007) suggested that experiential outdoor learning may help to produce graduates in higher education who are more literate in issues regarding sustainability. The preceding studies centered primarily on the students as potential recipients of the benefit of outdoor experiences. Deaton and Hardin (2014) examined the use of technology in nature to enhance and expand student learning, while Humphreys and Blenkinsop (2018) suggested that parents and nature may effectively co-teach younger children to espouse an “ecological identity” (p. 143).

Another study focused on the theme of experiential learning combines methodologies of narrative inquiry and ethnography to explore students' ability to learn from experiences (Horwood, 1991). Designed to gain a richer understanding of experiential learning, the study examined stories which arose from a student canoe trip. Horwood concluded that students "construct learning from experience," which they then relayed in the form of stories; stories which had "an authenticity which gives them power" (p. 13). Horwood's study provided a footprint for examining narratively the confluence of nature and learning, and further, laid some groundwork which helped me analyze the narrators' stories as a means of constructing learning from experiences in nature.

In this section, I review literature which sheds further light on ontological and theoretical nuances of storying applicable to this study. Specifically, since this study seeks to understand participants' connections among childhood experiences outdoors, those of their adulthood, and the stories which result, I reviewed literature on Goodall's (2005) concepts of narrative and familial inheritances.

### **Literature and Experiences Which Illuminate Nuances of Narrative Analysis**

#### **Narrative Inheritances**

Goodall's (2005) concept of narrative inheritances heavily informed this study. Narrative inheritances were important grounding for this study in terms of how teachers story the roots of their experiences. Specifically, I sought to understand how, if at all, teachers' narrative inheritances played into their journeys to outside? Was it their family norm to spend extended time outdoors? Alternatively, was their journey outside an act done in contrast to typical family structures? Goodall (2005) considers that we receive narrative inheritances through stories of lived experiences and identities passed down from parents, grandparents, and others which

become part of ourselves and our own stories. Goodall notes that “family stories matter to many of us in making sense of our lives” and “emphasizes the storied foundation of inheritances that accompany the biological” and legal conceptions of family (Bailey, 2018, p. 96). Family inheritances factored into the narratives of teachers who, at some point, found themselves wooed by nature, thus it was integral to the study to consider the role their origins and familial inheritances played in their journeys to and in nature. In the narrative exemplar which follows, I use the narrative inheritances of my own family to demonstrate the potential of narrative inheritances to reach down through generations and influence meanings we construct of ourselves and the world.



### **The Innies**

**Where you tend a rose, my lad, a thistle cannot grow.**

**-Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden***

My parents never questioned my obsession with nature, but neither did they seem to understand it. My father and mother watched me from the window, but never joined me outside unless there was a lawn mower to push or a weed to pull. “Are you going to stay out there all day?” my mother poked her head out from time to time and asked me. The question struck me as odd.

I wasn’t raised to venture outside often. I remember my parents as the studious, indoors type. It seemed that for them, outside was a place one went to get from one inside to another. As a family we worked inside and played inside, engaging in pastimes such as reading, playing the piano, completing puzzles, or playing board games, dominoes, or cards.

**Figure 3** *My parents, the "innies," smiling after the completion of a challenging puzzle, (2019).*



I have no memory of my parents talking about any outdoor pursuits even in their youth. I in fact lovingly refer to my parents as “innies” because of their professed love of the great indoors. When I reminisced on this facet of my memory, however, my father corrected me and told me we had once owned and occasionally used a canoe on family outings when I was very small. I could not recall one instance of it, however. Nevertheless, I wonder to what degree it might have swayed my story before I was even aware. As best as I could recall, we were a family firmly rooted inside four walls and roof - that was my familial inheritance (in Goodall’s terms) - but it wasn’t my father’s.

### ***Native Roots: My Father’s (and my) Narrative Inheritance***

My father grew up hearing stories about his maternal grandfather, Ross McClish, from Leona, my dad’s mother. Ross was a full-blood Choctaw. Ross was raised in an orphanage on tribal lands assigned to the Choctaws after the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced them from their homes. The Choctaws understood the connection between nature and humankind. Like



many other tribes, their governmental structure prioritized community and the good of the whole (Debo, 1961). This was a life my great grandfather understood. Ross, my dad was always told, was a kind, generous man of deep faith. He taught school in the tiny, one-room schoolhouse near Wilburton, Oklahoma. It was there he met Minnie Mosteller, a cheerful, energetic pupil whose family had crossed the Red River from Texas to settle near Wilburton. Ross was struck by Minnie's vibrancy and animation. He asked to walk her home from school one afternoon, and this soon became the high point of each day, the lengthy strolls filled with birdsong, sunshine, Minnie's lively stories and Ross's kind, amused smile. One afternoon she confessed that when her family first moved to the territory, she had been terrified of Indians, and thought that feathers grew directly out of their heads. To say her view had changed was no small understatement. Ross grew more enamored with his German-born student every day. Before long, he asked for his beloved pupil's hand in marriage.

Ross and Minnie's story was deeply embedded in the culture of their day (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Colonialist policies framed and controlled their lives, eventually shifting the trajectory of their lives entirely. In 1887 Congress passed the Dawes Severalty Act, which required Native Americans to dismantle their tribal governments, abandon communal land ownership, and allot parcels of land to individual tribe members instead (Friedman, 2005). The act took aim at the "Indian problem," or the refusal of many tribes to assimilate a more individualistic, White-Anglo culture (Stremlau, 2005). Conveniently, the Dawes Act also took more than 100 million acres of land from Native American tribes (Shultz et al., 2000), and rendered the land which did remain in Native possession vulnerable to appropriation by White settlers (Friedman, 2005).

Initially, the Choctaw were one of five tribes that were exempt from the mandates of the Dawes Act. Nevertheless, the act commissioned a group of “ambassadors” who went to Indian Territory to persuade exempt tribal leaders that land severalty was in their best interests as well (Carter, 1999). Tribal leaders did not agree. After two years in Indian Territory, the Dawes Commission failed to persuade a single exempt Native American nation to dismantle their tribal lands. Congress therefore flexed its muscles by passing the Dawes Act, which made land allotment a requirement for all tribes.

Like the other eligible members of his tribe, Ross was allotted a tract of land in Southeast Oklahoma where he and Minnie built a home and started their family. They farmed and lived off the land, showering their neighbors and friends with generosity. Because Ross was literate, others from his tribe sought his help to sign for loans and apply for various types of assistance, something Ross was always happy to do. His kindness was his undoing. White settlers’ insatiable appetite for land near Oklahoma Territory led to rampant abuse of tribal rights. When they learned that Ross had co-signed for loans, they called for an impossible full repayment and confiscated the only thing Ross owned to list as collateral: his land.

**Figure 4** *My great grandparents, Ross and Minnie McClish, (c. 1915).*



The sudden severance from his land devastated Ross, and was soon compounded by the necessity to leave Choctaw territory completely. Ross found work in the coal mines, and he and Minnie were forced to move to Okmulgee, Oklahoma. After years of mining coal, his health declined so precipitously that he had to find work elsewhere. For the last years of his life, Ross worked as the janitor at Okmulgee High School. The teacher who had given so generously once again found himself in a schoolhouse. Ross died of black lung disease when he was 58, a few years before my dad was born.

Though my dad never had the opportunity to meet his grandfather, he loved his grandmother Minnie dearly. The administrators at Okmulgee High School knew that Minnie had depended on Ross's income, and so they graciously offered her his job. For the rest of her life, Minnie served as the custodian there, even through the years that my dad was a student.

In her free time, Minnie tended a garden and helped to raise my father and his two older siblings. "Momma Clish," as he called her, told my dad stories of her childhood, of crossing the Red River in a covered wagon with her family, of her marriage to Ross, and of the day they lost

their beloved land in Indian Territory. The memory of that story never left my dad. “I was young when Momma Clish told me about losing their land,” my dad recalled, “but I’ll never forget her words or the sadness in her eyes when she remembered the day. My grandfather walked in the door of their farmhouse in Wilburton, and she could tell immediately that something was wrong. ‘Minnie,’ he said, “we’ve lost everything.” To Ross, the loss of the land and the cultural connection to it was an irreparable heartbreak.

The story of Ross and Minnie has become firmly woven into the family narrative. Seldom would generations gather under one roof that pieces of their story weren’t shared and their loss lamented. Ross’s name became a thread of connection itself, being given to sons and grandsons and great-grandsons down the line. Our family’s Choctaw heritage is an ongoing source of support. We cannot forget the connection to what was once he and Minnie’s land; the mail carrier brings a remembrance with each Choctaw newsletter delivered from the tribal headquarters near his former home. It calls us back to the connection, to the heritage, and to the land.



### **Applications of Narrative Inheritances in this Study**

In the previous narrative exemplar, although my own memories of my family of origin did not include trips outdoors, my father’s protestation that our family had in fact spent time canoeing when I was a small child entered into the pieced-together narrative of my journeys outside. The narrative then reached back two more generations to my great-grandfather, whose tie to his land and to nature are often honored at family gatherings, lending fragments of meaning to each of us in the family as we construct our own narratives of who we are. Each of the narrators in this study have their own narratives they have inherited from family, and it is

therefore incumbent upon the researcher to step into these stories from the past with the narrators to understand how their journeys outside began.

### **Cultural Inheritances (Goodall, 2005)**

Another inheritance which informed this study considered the manner in which culture, mores, beliefs, and norms infiltrate family's "stories of us" and become part of our identities before we are even cognizant of the inculcation. These cultural inheritances (Goodall, 2005) surfaced in stories teachers told of their lived experiences outdoors as children and adults, attesting to Clandinin's (2000) assertion that narrative is always situated in context. In this study, as narratives were collected and then analyzed, it was incumbent upon me as a narrative researcher to parse out the cultural elements which weighed upon and influenced teachers' stories and perceptions of self. The narrative which follows is an example of a cultural inheritance centered around spiritual beliefs which my parents passed to me, the metamorphosis that inheritance underwent as nature shone a different light onto it, and the ever-changing yet still tenaciously-present ballast of spirituality in my lived experiences outdoors.



### **Where God Is**

**“Miracles have ceased.” Have they indeed? When? They had not ceased this afternoon when I walked into the wood and got into bright, miraculous sunshine.**

**-Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals, 1837-1844***

My father was the pastor of a Southern Baptist church. As the pastor's kid, I got to tag along with the older kids when they went to youth camp each summer. It was my first faraway adventure, a full hour and fifteen-minute bus ride away from my backyard. I adored the camp in the Arbuckle Mountains. It was a wonderland of sandstone hills, hiking paths, and waterfalls.

There were many rules about where one could and could not go in camp, of course, but there were seven thousand youth for the adults to monitor, and I was small and easy to overlook.

The Devil's Bathtub, as we called it, was a natural swimming hole at the youth camp where Falls Creek poured over the edge of a dome-shaped granite outcropping. Campers flocked to Devil's Bathtub en masse to escape the torturing heat of Oklahoma summers. We were not allowed to wear short pants in the camp, so we climbed into the water in our jeans. We rolled our pant legs up as high as we could, rendering two thick, denim donuts which squeezed our thighs like boa constrictors. Though it was awkward to drag our bodies through the water laden with wet clothes, it never stopped anyone from getting in.

**Figure 5** *The Devil's Bathtub at church camp, circa 1972, with campers in their long pants.*  
(Hinton, 2017).



The area beyond the granite dome of Devil's Bathtub was strictly off limits, but campers could climb up the side of the dome and scoot down the waterfall on one end. Lifeguards stood nearby to make sure campers complied with the rules: no pushing or shoving, no jumping off the dome, no disrobing of any amount, and absolutely positively no going beyond the camp boundary behind the granite dome. After scrambling up the rock and sliding down the waterfall a dozen times, I paused at the top to look into the woods beyond the camp boundary. There I saw a trail which ran alongside the Falls Creek and disappeared enticingly in the distance. The sun broke through the branches of a canopy of blackjack oaks and illuminated the creek as it collided with the underlying stones. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

My spirit whispered "go" faster than my mind could protest, and before I was even fully aware of it, my feet had stepped out onto the trail and had begun to wander toward the sunlight. The smell of the hot dusty clay mixed with the water dripping from my shoes. The cicadas' song undulated rhythmically all around me. I closed my eyes and lifted my face upward, my wet hair beginning to create steam on my cheeks. There was something distinctly primordial about that moment; I was connected to the earth and it was connected to me.

I had been compelled to do so many things as a child with very little freedom, but that moment and that place were my own, each step transforming me into something I didn't understand. I had been to church a thousand times. I had attended services at the tabernacle in that very campground, but I had never felt the presence of the divine like I did in the solitude of the trail just beyond the camp boundary. And while it was indeed a wondrous moment, suddenly God was much bigger than he had been just moments before. He was no longer scripted or contained. I knew he was speaking to me, but without the usual intermediaries of a Bible, a hymn book, or my father's voice. There was nothing formulaic or predictable or even particularly safe

about it. But he was there. His fingerprints were on every detail. He was powerfully there, and he was with me.

Only in retrospect do I see that event as the beginning of a spiritual metamorphosis for me. In the days and weeks which followed those moments on the trail, I attuned to nature differently. There was some connection, I realized, to the deep-seated peace I felt sitting in the clover under the trees and the kiss of the Divine I felt on my face as the sunlight warmed my dripping, dirty hair. It differed so utterly from my previous spiritual experiences that it was somewhat troubling, yet I couldn't help but long to wander out to find it again.



### **Applications of Cultural Inheritances in this Study**

Spiritual inheritance is but one facet of the larger concept of cultural inheritances. Nevertheless, the above narrative provides a clear example of ways I tie spirituality to nature as I chose to foreground that particular lens through storying. Through narrative, I have made sense of this aspect of my life and the metamorphosis which took place when an original impartation of an inheritance was acted upon by an external phenomenon, in this case, nature. In this way, I make meaning of/in/for myself.

In my example, nature magnified and expanded my understanding of the divine. In my study, some of the narrators storied nature as agential in their understandings of the divine. For others, a link between nature and the divine did not emerge. Nature can hold a similar sway on understandings of gender, social class, or other socially-constructed phenomena which press on and influence our identities and sense of self. This study sought to tease out these nuances, considering both the cultural themes as they pertain to that individual, and also a part of a larger cultural understanding of women and of teachers in nature.



## Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter, I examined existing research which considered individuals (and at times, specifically teachers or specifically women) who engage in outdoor activities. I reviewed literature published on outdoor and leisure education and some of the methods, best practices, and student outcomes therein. I also examined research which illuminates the roles nature plays in the lives of whole populations of people. In the second section of this chapter, I reviewed literature which explicates ontological and theoretical concepts that informed this narrative inquiry. I provided autobiographical narratives as exemplars to help further the readers' understanding of each of these concepts, as well as their connection to narrative inquiry methodology. Each study provided salient factors, details, nuances, etc. which helped to concretize and sharpen my focus for my particular study. They provided avenues of insight into meaning making as I listened to the narrators story their lives. Each served to forward my thinking as I considered Dewey's continuity of experience, doing, and undergoing, and storying as it ties each teacher's connections to nature, past and present.

Consideration of such literature provided rich soil in which to work out a research puzzle that was both scholarly and personal. Although this chapter illuminated various arenas in which scholars have examined outdoor experiences and education, I found a paucity of scholarly examinations of what experience in nature does for teachers - a consideration not of teaching time outdoors, nor of formalized outdoor education per se, but of the teachers experiences in nature during their personal time, the stories they tell of those experiences, and the sense of self they continually unveiled through experiencing and narrating. Therefore, the findings in the literature served as salient points of departure as I came alongside the other narrators and illuminated new and under-researched avenues of dialogue to consider with them. In Chapter VI,

I use the findings which resulted from these dialogues to raise “questions worth asking” based in part upon what I found to be a more nuanced consideration of women educators who commune with/in nature and its meaning for them.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I describe the epistemological and theoretical foundations of this study, provide the rationale, discussed methodology and procedures, participants, and methods involved in my inquiry. First, I provide the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the study, as well as aspects of Dewey's philosophies that I used as a theoretical framework which informed this study. In this section I also explain the pertinence of these theoretical underpinnings to Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry, and to this study. To help further the reader's understanding, I then provide the components of Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry, and explain how it informed data collection and analysis. I then detail the research methods, data collection and analysis methods employed. Afterward I discuss ethical considerations and limitations, as well as my own positionality and its potential influence on this study.

#### **Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective**

Positivism holds that knowledge is a "veridical 'representation' of the world as it 'exists' prior to being experienced" (von Glaserfeld, 1991, p. 16). Positivists assume that there is an objective truth which can and must be discovered free from researchers' contexts, biases, and values (Crotty, 1998). Post-positivists also hold that there are objective truths, but instead of

discovering them, humankind approaches them ever closer by repeated processes of conjecture and falsification (Crotty, 1998).

Constructionist epistemology rejects the notion of context-free, value-free truths. Instead, constructionism holds that humans take an active part in constructing knowledge as they move through and interact with the world. Crotty (1998) describes a primary tenet of constructionism by writing that “[a]ll knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). Stated differently, humans experience and study reality by looking through the lenses of their own historical, cultural, familial and other contexts and the lenses others use to interpret and understand the world. In doing so, they participate in constructing the meanings of that reality. Given this understanding, I chose to situate this study within a constructionist epistemology. As a researcher, I proceeded forth with the understanding that I was constructing meanings of the women’s interactions with nature, seeing that each woman learns via experientially unique interactions as individuals, making meaning as she communes with the elements of nature which exist in a given space of learning. Since in this view, nature even in the same location changes constantly, as do women’s interactions with nature, no two experiences are exactly the same for women moving in those spaces. I as the researcher therefore considered each experience as distinct moments from which I constructed unique meanings.

Theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance of the researcher which shapes and influences her study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Following Clandinin’s focus on the social, cultural, and temporal situatedness of experience, I conducted this narrative inquiry into the experiences of women educators with/in nature through the theoretical perspective of

interpretivism. A researcher using an interpretivist theoretical perspective “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). This means that the interpretivist researcher does not consider reality to be context free. For this reason, the interpretivist sets out from the foundation that there exists a reality apart from being known, but that reality only has meaning as we understand and interpret it through our own perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Further, an interpretivist perspective gives space for considering Clandinin’s concept of the commonplaces in relation to analyzing and interpreting stories: contexts which are common to and influence narratives. The commonplaces aid narrative research by offering different angles from which a researcher can view a given narrative. Angles such as family backstory, personal history, social settings, and cultural contexts may elicit different perspectives on the role/importance/necessity of time spent outside. Interpretivism allows seemingly similar phenomena in nature to have radically different meanings to different researchers, in my case, focusing on understanding women educators’ experiences and frames of reference.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Dewey’s Continuity of Experience**

A well-known American philosopher, John Dewey is widely considered to be the pre-eminent voice of pragmatism in the 20th century (Heney, 2016, p. 54). The concept of experience was key in Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy as well in his view of education, so he was careful to explain his interpretation of what experience is/does. Dewey argued that experience is the way humans interact and engage with the world around them (Gibson, 2016). Experiences, he argued, can have educational value when they are linked to and integrated with one another. This connection of experiences has the capacity to expand the learner’s horizons

and enrich her educative journey. “[E]very experience lives on in further experiences,” Dewey (1998) wrote, “Hence, the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kinds of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (p. 16-17). It is incumbent upon educators, he therefore asserted, to direct students toward experiences which broaden and expand their understanding in positive ways.

Dewey labeled this principle the continuity of experience. “The principle of continuity of experience means every experience both takes something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1998, p. 27). Stated differently, one experience proceeds forth from prior experiences, which in turn informs future experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Unlike some intellectuals of his day, Dewey did not believe that experiences were isolated events. Instead, he posited that experiences are “fluid and contextual,” not clearly separated, but flowing one into the next, and affecting an influence upon them (Gibson, 2016, p. 11). Experiences reach forward, even as they reach back, a phenomenon which happens continually, but which is rendered visible when events are pieced together cohesively as narratives. This interplay between an invisible connectedness of experiences and the potential of storying to bring that connection to the fore makes Dewey’s theory salient and valuable in Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) narrative inquiry model.

### **Doing and Undergoing**

Dewey (1966) also proposed that through such continuous and connected experiences, one engages in “doing” and “undergoing” (p. 47). Doing, according to Dewey (1934), is a person’s acting upon her environment, while undergoing is the environment acting upon her. This “outgoing and incoming energy” is the “rhythm of everyday experience” which comprises the basis of experience (Dewey, 1934, p. 208). In this way, the “world becomes an integral part

of the self,” and through “habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also inhabit the world” (Dewey, 1966, p. 109).

According to Dewey (1934), it is important to balance doing and undergoing; too much of one blurs experience, he claimed. Dewey (1934) posited that “zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person especially in this hurried environment in which we live, with experience of incredible paucity” (p. 46). Under such conditions, resistance is treated as “an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection” (p. 46). Conversely, too much undergoing can hinder experience as well. When the goal is “the mere undergoing of this and that,” of “crowding together of as many impressions as possible” then “nothing takes root in the mind,” according to Dewey’s thinking (*Art as Experience*). This balance of doing and undergoing is directly salient to a narrative inquiry on women educators in nature and provides a theoretical basis for the consideration of doing and undergoing as it happens for women in nature.

These aspects of Dewey’s philosophy of education and its subsequent influence on Clandinin’s vision of narrative inquiry informed the design of my study in the following ways. From the autobiographical point of departure, I will address how much I have learned about myself, about the world, about the nature of human/nature interactions, as well as human-human interactions through doing and undergoing specifically in nature. In applying a Deweyan framework, I see threads which tie together the story of a girl becoming herself by entering into natural settings, whose sights, smells, sounds, and sensations informed each successive event consciously or unconsciously. In applying concepts from Dewey’s philosophies as a theoretical framework in interpreting narrator stories, I make sense of these experiences and understand them as more than just learning by doing, although that certainly played a part; there was a becoming by doing and undergoing which not only honed skills but also forged a particular sort

of mind and heart. I was already in a steady pattern of continuity in outdoor activities before I was even aware of the theoretical threads with which I now forge meaning by connecting past, present, and future events. I designed the body of this study, therefore, with this understanding of continuity and doing/undergoing, a framework will guide me to listen and look for Deweyan framings of experience in other teachers' outdoor narratives as well.

### **Methodology/Inquiry Approach**

Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry seeks to examine subjects' storied lives by "coming alongside" participants (referred to in this study as narrators) as they piece together fragments of their past, rituals, routines, watershed moments, and everyday actions narratively to form a present cohesive story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The language, "coming alongside," means in this instance to enter into their stories and abide dialogically with them in the stories as they remember, reminisce, and construct meaning through re-tellings. Subjects and researcher co-create meaning over time as data is generated dialogically. Narrative inquiry invites a richly nuanced unfolding of lived experiences that the researcher/narrators weave together as cohesive strands which make sense and meaning as they are pondered and shared.

There were several justifications for choosing narrative inquiry as a profitable platform for this particular study. As educators who spend time in nature, we know and grow and become in the world through varied experiences outdoors, some in adverse weather, others in pleasant; some on hostile terrain, others on gentle and inviting slopes. Dissimilar as the settings are on certain levels, a narrative theoretical orientation means I choose to see cohesive connections in stories which serve as a framework for our understanding of ourselves and our world. In this view, we consciously and unconsciously reach into our past and rely upon it to inform and provide continuity to each new visitation to nature.



## **Cohesiveness Between My Inquiry Approach and Theoretical Framework**

Dewey emphasized such centrality of continuity to experience, as one experience proceeds forth from prior experiences and in turn informs future experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This Deweyan concept is the heart of narrative Clandinin's model of inquiry. Working from Dewey's theory of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the experience-narrative connection:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of those stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (p. 375)

The foregrounding of experience was a key focus of my study, since the experiences which I and other educators have done and undergone (Dewey, 1966) outdoors were/are potentially catalyzing in life transformations, and the telling and re-telling of our stories aided in solidifying meaning of experiences and in turn addressing the key questions in this inquiry.

Secondly, narrative inquiry affords ample latitude to draw at length from familial "narrative inheritances" (Goodall, 2005). Narrative inheritance are stories that circulate in families in varied forms which allow "us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means" (Goodall, 2005, p. 23). Narrative inheritances elucidated milestones which may have shifted narrators' trajectories toward the

outdoors. If a teacher's home of origin was rich in experiences and exposures to outside adventures, it provided a vein of understanding which narrative inquiry can uniquely explore, and new, deeper understandings of self emerged which then served as further data.

In the previous chapter, I wrote about my parents, the "Innies," a narrative that I both inherited and created to story my understanding of my past. This narrative serves to elucidate my narrative inheritance, and further, helps me and the listeners of my story to better understand why my pull to outside sometimes puzzled my family. Additionally, I have passed this narrative to my children, two of whom also find themselves pulled toward the outdoors, and one who, like his grandparents, proclaims himself to be a lover of the great indoors. Inheritances such as this can potentially surface, and sometimes reveal themselves only upon retrospection. As the storyteller critically examines her lived experiences with family through a holistic, retrospective lens, the "hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things" which arise from "pieced-together patterning, after the fact" can become more visible (Geertz, 1995, p. 3). The narrative researcher sees these stories as reflective and created, manufactured. We make and remake them, and through them we make sense of ourselves.

Narrative inheritances are thus not merely the factual retelling of events of the past. The notion of "family" can be "conflicted, nourishing, personal, political, rhetorical, empirical, embodied, ideal, an impossibility, and a site of belonging and identity (Bailey, 2018, p. 95). Families are embedded in historical timelines which weave and intersect with highly subjectivized events and unfoldings. Family is a complex, constructed, and malleable idea. Narrative inquiry allows for member meanings (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) of participants' ideas of family to emerge through dialogue; such member meanings were important to consider as I explored the larger contextual and societal meanings which the study illuminated.

Thirdly, narrative inquiry places value upon multiple forms of representation. It “decolonizes” inquiry: just as nations can be colonized and subjected to the governing norms of the colonizer, so too research can be colonized by methodologies which compel the researcher to align with grand narratives and follow strict guidelines. “If we have prescriptive and tyrannizing forms of inquiry, it is a colonizing gesture to say this is the only way, this is the primary way, this is the best way” to conduct and analyze research, but “the field of contemporary methodology is diverse, expansive, and generative” (Bailey, 2020). Narrative inquiry favors meaning over facts; it looks more toward local stories than grand narratives; it embraces ambiguity, irony, contradiction within the human experience (Gergen, 1982). This is surely a primary reason I was drawn to narrative inquiry as a methodology, and to its embrace of “a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation” (Bailey, 2020), and which embraces irony and emotionality (Gergen, 1982). There is nothing smooth or steady about a journey of becoming, and certainly not in spaces as ever-changing as nature, nor in the stories people construct about their lives. “Storied accounts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4) of self-actualization forged in nature are fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions because they don’t reflect truth; they reflect and construct experience.

That the narrators were also women adds yet another layer to the discussion of contrasting and paradoxical beliefs which may emerge as contradictory voices from past and present weigh in on what they perhaps “should” or “should not” do; voices which may illuminate tensions in the view of self. Though contradictory, these voices must have a place where they can be held in a space of perpetual liminality and yet still examined for their value in one’s storied life. Narrative inquiry allows for and encourages the possibility of a divided self (Bochner,

1997) rather than a cohesive unitary view of self which can become a generative and illuminating tool.

### **Important Components of Clandinin’s model of Narrative Inquiry**

Clandinin emphasizes that narratives are always situated in what she has labeled the “commonplaces” of temporality, sociality, and place; conditions under which experience is studied through a “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). It is incumbent upon the narrative researcher to be vigilant for the presence of each of these elements as they act simultaneously upon narrators’ stories to shape each telling and re-telling of the stories. In this section, I provide a personal narrative as an exemplar, then explain Clandinin’s understanding of each of the commonplaces central to her conception of narrative inquiry. Following each, I described their application in this particular study.



### **Becoming the Stories I Tell**

**We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.**

**Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free***

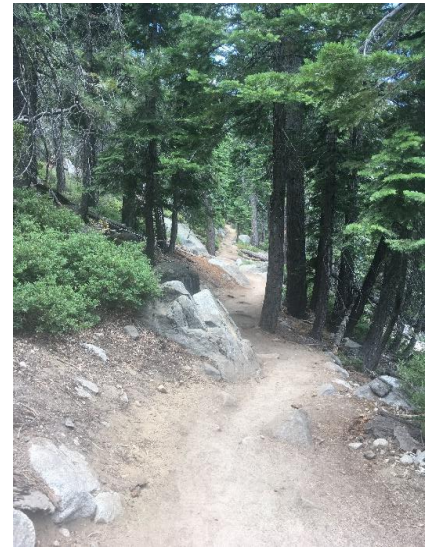
**Figure 6** *My campsite at Lake Tahoe, CA, (2019).*



**Figure 7** *Kayaking at Lake Tahoe, CA, summer, (2019).*



**Figure 8** *Alone on a trail, (2019).*



The above are photos (figures 6, 7, and 8) I took during two different trips in 2019. Without the backstory, these images show only an idyllic camp setting, a picturesque hiking trail, and a relaxing day out on the kayak. What the photos don't tell is that I was alone on these trips in Colorado and California. I hiked alone and camped alone, kayaked alone, ate alone, traveled alone. The choice was to go alone, or not go at all. Yes, I was happy to be there, and in truth, needed to be there. But loneliness and fear were my close companions as well. The mountain lions were active in Colorado. I traversed the lovely trail above spinning violently on my heel at every snap of a twig to see what might be behind me. The water was choppy on the sapphire waters above, and I don't swim well. A woman alone at a campsite gives a distinct public appearance of physical vulnerability, and my presence had not escaped the notice of the group of men camping just beside me. It's a phenomenon I don't fully understand, but the call to go outside pulls on me relentlessly, even when I am afraid, alone, or both. There are two very

powerful sides to every journey outside, one which fills me with rejoicing and the other which fills me with dread, and I find I must embrace them both.

Nevertheless, when I returned to the “safety” of indoors and the company of others, I found that the stories I told of those days were lively, positive, full of humorous and glorious moments. It came as an even greater surprise that I knew what I was saying was true. There had been humorous moments and glorious moments, and I already missed being there. The difficulty/isolation/fear were not mutually exclusive of the sensations of pride/positivity/personal growth I felt afterward. On that trail, I was not brave. I was in fact rather comical. It was only when I was safely home and saw the thread connecting that journey to the present that I felt and therefore became brave. It’s not easy to understand much less explain with any coherence how both sides can exist simultaneously, nor how the tension between the two seems only to magnify the presence of both. Hidden within that tension is something quite foundational to the self which is created, imagined, and realized in nature.



### *The Commonplaces*

1. **Temporality:** Crites (1971) wrote that the “formal quality of experience through time is [seen as] inherently narrative” (p. 291). Narratives are not equivalent to an original experience, but are instead a revision of the last retelling of that experience. Each revision differs from the last, because the storyteller has changed and grown. She is immersed in a new temporal context which shades and alters the story’s content. Temporality informed this study specifically in the following manner: A phenomenon I have been keenly aware of in my own storied accounts of outdoors is that they take on a more nostalgic hue when I retell them, as seen in the photo-elicitation exemplar above (figures 6, 7, and 8). It is not primarily for show or hubris that events

which were frightening or negative in the moment are later recounted as humorous, beneficial, or even heroic; in retrospect, such events transform and become something other or more than what they were when lived. This temporal aspect was elucidated explicitly in interview questions and in conversation with other narrators in the study as I sought to learn if and to what extent phenomena similar to this emerged in their storying, and if other temporal themes occurred.

2. **Sociality:** Narrative researchers attend simultaneously to personal and social conditions which co-exist in narratives. Personal conditions consist in the “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480) but form concurrently amidst the social conditions: cultural, institutional, familial, linguistic (Clandinin, 2013, p. 40). Sociality informed this study in the following way: As women and as educators at this particular moment in history, we tend to dwell in a liminal space of what society dictates to be “proper” or “responsible” or even possible for women to do in nature, particularly if a woman is alone. This is an ever shifting and sliding concept, and treading upon it to pursue hopes and desires can push on the cultural mores, familial acceptabilities, and even institutional approbation. In this study, I sought to understand how and to what extent implicit and explicit social conditions may have engendered tension, support, challenges, etc. as narrators chose to enter various outdoor spaces.

3. **Place:** Places shape our identities. Narrative inquiry looks at ways that place influences “micro-identities,” or temporary or place-based identities. Place was a central component in the design of this study. The narrators and I not only explored our narratives of places where we spent time with/in nature, but dialogically parsed out the significance the cultural and social conditions which drove us to places in nature, and how each of those elements may have affected or informed our understandings of self. We considered the role of both indoor

and outdoor places which constitute the spaces of our teacher lives as we navigate with and against a host of structural and cultural currents. We considered dialogically how nature as place affects our decision-making processes.

### ***Entering the Field and Coming Alongside***

A cornerstone of the narrative inquiry methodology is the coming alongside of participants in a given research setting, creating spaces for conversation, allowing for imaginations to open and ponderings to have space to move (Clandinin, Caine, & Lessard, 2018). The caveat to this particular aspect of the study's design is that the COVID-19 pandemic precluded the extended dwelling-in-place and physical coming alongside that I would have liked. Therefore, because of these circumstances, it was necessary to come alongside the other narrators virtually. It was fortunate that we already had a rich in-person history of dwelling together in nature which provide a strong foundation and touchstone for including storied accounts of past meaningful moments in nature as place. Nevertheless, the video conversations and virtual campfire chats successfully allowed rich narrative to be generated; tellings, retellings, commonalities and distinctions arose which invited further conversation and the unfolding of data, referred to in narrative inquiry as field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I began this study with a pilot dialogic interview. I contacted one narrator and invited her to a virtual meeting in which we began the process of storying relationally. I attended to temporality, sociality, and place in the pilot study, but remained open to themes which did not necessarily fall neatly into these arenas. The pilot interview served to shed light on possible themes and story trajectories. It also helped me to streamline questions that I use as initial prompts for the interviews that followed.

### ***Complexities of Narrative Inquiry***



Clandinin and Huber (2010) are clear that narrative researchers do not consider storytelling to be an “untethered” process (p. 81). In Clandinin’s model, “untethered” has particular meanings: stories can serve explicit, implicit, or subconscious agendas. Stories can circle, overlap, loop, and contradict themselves. Narratives tangle and untangle upon each successive retelling (Langellier, 2001). Stories can emphasize, de-emphasize, omit, or embellish as a given environment and audience require. They are subject to biases, lenses of past or prevailing cultural mores, and limited human perspectives across space and time. This reinforces this study’s place in the constructionist/interpretivist paradigms. Stories are messy and dynamic by nature. Narrative researchers understand that narrative is “a product of the present and the interests, needs, and wishes that attend it (Freeman, 2007, pp. 137-138), and yet they are a primary thread by which we understand ourselves and the world in which we live.

In this study, I sought how I and the other narrators made and re-made meaning through narrative accounts of the past, interpret our identities as outdoorswomen through the significance we ascribed to events, and the biases and agendas which may lurk beneath the stories we craft. I engaged dialogically to consider how primary experiences outdoors, and secondary and tertiary framings and reframings of the stories retold, shaped narrators’ sense of self. To what degree, in other words, did the work of narrative itself become an influencer and motivator? Understanding these underlying, implicit elements is a key work of narrative inquiry.

Consequently, this complexity in narrative challenges an uncritical interpretation of stories just as they are told. I will discuss this at greater length in the section on ethical considerations, but it is important for understanding narrative inquiry to note that narratives are not “windows onto a real,” (Bailey, 2020) but are instead places of work (Bell, 2002) in which the storyteller is inextricably situated in and influenced by her contexts, temporality, and the

culture(s) of her past and present. For example, in my own narrative about my schooling experience which I provided in Chapter I, I re-tell my memories now as an adult and a teacher. My current contexts influence me to emphasize structural elements which may have been at work in the educational processes I experienced in my childhood. I emphasize the young first-grade teacher who tried unsuccessfully to engage a student in accelerated reading in a system which was perhaps ill-structured to do so; a busy librarian asked to work outside her prescribed set of duties without structures, scope, or sequences on which to rely; a field of clover, whose slow ontology (Ulmer, 2016) proved to be the better teacher of green, and which nudged me further out into nature.

As I come alongside the other narrators in the study, we will consider dialogically what contexts such as these, and others, are present and influential in the story and in the manner in which it is told. These influencing contexts, then, will provide ballast as I analyze the individual narrators' stories vis-à-vis a broader view of women educators in modern society.

### **Research Methods/ Sources for Field Texts**

In this section of the chapter, I describe the methods I used to conduct the narrative study of women educators who value and spend time with/in nature, their experiences in nature, and what it does for their sense of self. I explain recruitment procedures, data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures, as well as the ways in which narrative inquiry methodology informs each of these processes. I then explain ethical considerations salient to my narrative inquiry.

### **Selecting Narrators**

Consistent with narrative inquiry, in this study I refer to participants and myself as narrators. I invited other teachers who have spent a considerable amount of time outdoors to

narrate their stories as part of the study. I am honored to know several educators who fit this description. These are personal friends with whom I have participated in a variety of outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, cycling, rowing, etc. Throughout our experiences outdoors, I have some knowledge of their backstories. Before conducting this study, however, the nuances and details of their underlying narratives were unknown to me. Narrators were women aged 43-66 who are currently in a teaching position, or who are retired from teaching. I included six narrators in this study other than myself.

### **Recruiting Narrators**

Narrative inquiry methodology allows researchers to invite narrators who were previously known to them. I contacted potential subjects by email and face-to-face personal intercept, and explained my research aims clearly. I asked them to consider participating in an in-person interview regarding the research topic. I provided my interview questions ahead of time for them to examine before they accepted or declined.

Data Collection: Field Texts. Given that data is collected dialogically over a span of time while the researcher dwells physically or virtually in the field with participants/narrators, data gathering in narrative research methodology is referred to as “field texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 92). Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2009) give this rich description of field texts:

By giving voice and making visible our stories of our experiences in relation with participants, we created a space in which to tell our stories, hear others’ stories, and give these stories back to each other with new insight. In this relational process with each other, we shared what was happening for us and, in so doing, had an opportunity to retell and inquire into our storied experiences as researchers in relation in yet another way. We have, therefore, a rich and detailed set of field texts of our participants’ lived and told

stories in relation with us as well as our own lived and told stories in relation with each other. (p. 83)

Types of field texts which align well with narrative inquiry that I utilized for this study were life experiences, teacher stories, biographical and autobiographical writing, letters, research interviews, family stories, conversations, and photographs (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 93). As the other narrators and I engaged relationally with these kinds of stories, the field texts, as defined above by Clandinin et al., began to emerge.

### **Interviews: Conversations, Family Stories, and Life Experiences**

I began by conducting life story interviews in which the participant related a birth-to-now narrative and important life events she found pertinent to the topic. This first-person narrative, which I analyzed, was generative for additional questioning. I conducted two interviews per participant, ranging in length from 90 minutes to 2 hours each, the second providing the opportunity for following up on previous responses, as well as for photo elicitation. Due to pandemic restrictions in place during the study, I gathered narrative accounts through online Zoom-style meetings.

I provided participants with the topics/questions ahead of time, to give them the opportunity to ponder and remember. I utilize open-ended questions, some generated in advance and other raised during the interviews themselves, which allowed participants to “speak in their own voices, to express themselves freely, deciding where to start the story, as well as the flow of the topics” (Kim, 2016, p. 165). The priority was to elicit stories, not just responses which align with conventional social science inquiry.

### **Style of Narrative Interview Questions**

Patton (2015) wrote that “the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (p. 427). Since my goal was to elicit stories, it was important to use questions that invited richly-detailed, free-flowing responses. Traditional social science interviews can be very formal; interviews in narrative inquiry are invitations to “sit and chat awhile.” In order to do this, I had to be careful to avoid academic jargon and overly-formal speech, and instead allow the inquiry to benefit from more relaxed, casual wording. The reader will see this reflected in the questions I have included below.

**Pilot Interview.** I conducted a pilot interview which helped me to refine my interview process. The pilot interview was a valuable step in the conceptual process, facilitating an emergent flexible design (Patton, 2015) more in keeping with the goals of the work and the framework established by the inquiry questions. To conduct the pilot interview, I contacted my participant and arranged for a Zoom meeting. The meeting lasted approximately an hour and a half. The interview was a place of learning for me. After conducting the interview, the participant provided valuable feedback with ideas for making the questions more evocative, streamlined, and clear. I recorded and analyzed our interview session. The questions below have been revised based on my analysis and reflection of the pilot interview.

**Step-by-Step Process.** I began by following Patton’s (2015) protocol for opening the interview: I thanked them for their willingness to talk with me; I explained that I would cover different themes throughout the conversation. I explained that I would begin by getting a sense of the types of experiences they had with their families in nature. I also explained that we would consider questions such as: who are you outside? How do you think of yourself outside? The interview questions and process follow.

### ***The Interviews***

Introduction: Thank you so much for your willingness to talk with me today. We are going to talk about outdoor spaces, and experiences you've had in outdoor spaces. Within that topic, I'd like for us to consider a variety of different themes, look at it from a few different angles. What we are after here are your stories, so please don't feel the need to have neat and tidy succinct answers to these questions. If you feel the urge to say, "I remember the time when..." that's awesome! We will start by trying to get a sense of what kinds of experiences you may have had in nature as a child, and how those may have influenced you. We will consider family as a part of that. How you may have learned to go outdoors as a child. Then, we will talk about outdoor places that may hold a special place in your heart, and why. We will talk about ways that the time you've spent outdoors may have affected the way you see yourself. We'll consider gender and what effects being a woman may have had as you went outdoors.

- Let's talk first of all about your experiences in nature as a child. Describe some of your earliest or maybe strongest memories of being in nature.
- Let's talk about how, if at all, your family of origin may have introduced you to nature.
- How common was it for you to spend time outdoors with your family?
- What sort of activities did you do as a family and what were your most and least favorite?
- Were there stories of your parents'/grandparents' connection to nature?
- Is there a particular place or item in nature (waterfall, trees, ocean, beach, etc.) or location that holds particular value to you, and if so, why that place/item?
- How, if at all, has being outside has affected the way you see yourself?
- Are you the same person outdoors on a trail, for example, that you are at home, or in the classroom?

- What are some outdoor “milestones” which shaped your identity, either positive or negative experiences?
- What lessons have you learned from outside, and how?
- Has spending time outdoors affected your acceptance of self, and / or helped you to become your authentic self? Share some stories as examples.
- Let’s look through the teacher lens for a bit. How, if at all, has being a woman, who values nature affected your modes or styles of teaching / pedagogy?
- Has your affinity for outdoors ever caused conflict with bosses or administrators? For example, in trying to take students outdoors, etc.
- Let’s consider gender. Do you have memories of time when issues of gender posed specific challenges for you, and in what ways?
- Have your outdoor experiences ever conflicted with societal norms, such as “a woman shouldn’t be outdoors alone”?
- In a research article I read prior to this study, a woman who taught in an outdoor program commented that at times, she felt like outdoor activity was seen by many as a “boys’ club” to which women were unwelcome (p. 43).
- I’d like to talk about how experiences in nature may have played a role in your connections to others. Let’s talk first about friendships and social connections. Describe some friendships and social connections you may have because of the time you spend outdoors.
- Some people believe that time in nature has a spiritual significance for them. Has communing with nature had a spiritual component or connection for you? Describe a story or reflection of that.

- Have you ever been catapulted outside by trauma? Or looked for healing by communing with nature?
- How do your stories of events change or evolve over time as you change and grow?
- Do you find yourself seeing events in a different light? More nostalgic/nuanced, etc.?
- Are there connections in or between your stories that you can only see now in retrospect?

Follow up 1: May I contact you for follow up?

Follow up 2: I'd like to see some photographs representing time you have spent in the outdoors that were memorable for you. Could you bring some?

As part of the dialogic interviewing process, I engaged in active and sympathetic listening, and maintained flexibility to allow participants to expand story elements without haste, or to skip completely over other topics. I was mindful to employ narration and conversation phases (Kim, 2016, p. 169) as appropriate so that the speaker could narrate without undue interruption, so that the interview progressed productively. Between the first and second interviews, I reflected, processed, and conceptualized themes to see how the follow-up interview could further my specific goals for this study.

### ***Photo-elicitation in Interviewing***

Narrative research makes use of several avenues of visual inquiry. One of those is photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002). As a method, it involves using photographs, often taken previously by the participants themselves, and using them to elicit details in stories, or perhaps to encounter new avenues of storying. Earlier in this chapter, the section entitled, "Becoming the Stories I Tell" was an example of a narrative generated from photo elicitation. Researchers using narrative inquiry methodology understand that photos can provide a point of departure for participants' stories, evoking stories about the photographs and the "stories that lie behind them and between



them” (Harrison, 2002, p. 108). Honoring the adage which claims that a picture is worth a thousand words, narrative researchers embrace photo elicitation as a way “in” to multifaceted nuances such as sights, smells, sounds, and emotions which a photograph can exhume from participants’ memories. In a 2017 study, for example, Loeffler used photo elicitation to study 14 college students and their perceptions of outdoor programs at their schools (p. 536). The participants’ photos served as prompts to elaborate on topics such as spiritual and interpersonal connections to nature.

In the first interview, I asked participants if they would be willing to bring salient photographs to the second interview. Some participants provided photos for the second interview, others did not. In the subsequent meeting, I asked those who had provided photographs to use them as a point of departure for stories which related to the images they shared. In doing this, I was able to elicit more depth and detail in their some of their stories.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In my study, the narrators were people I consider to be friends. There was justification for this choice within Clandinin’s model of narrative inquiry, as it asks researchers to come alongside participants and enter into their stories with them for a duration of time. This choice made it easier to recruit appropriate participants. Existing friendships have potential to facilitate richer dialogues; a deeper “entering into” stories, since conversational trust and ease are already established. It also involved a delicate interviewing process appropriate for narrative inquiry. The trust and rapport already established had the potential to increase richness of the experience, and therefore the participants were likely to be more vulnerable and open in discussions with me than they would with a stranger. It was incumbent upon me to provide what Geertz (1995) rightly

calls “thick descriptions” of the elements of my study beforehand, so that they were fully informed of my own ideological predispositions which are without doubt reflected in my writing.

Since narrative inquiry considers stories along with their temporal, social, and other contextual situatedness, and since it remains mindful of paradoxes and inconsistencies which are common in storied lives, the process necessitates taking special consideration of relational ethics. Stories speak to the heart of selves and identities. People’s stories “have a way of taking care of them,” (Lopez, 1990, p. 60), and it is incumbent upon the researcher to exercise great care and exhibit the utmost respect for these stories. “Stories are what keep each of us alive, able to go on with living a life in ways that are meaningful” (Clandinin, Claire, & Lessard, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, in my study I exercised care in collecting stories, analyzing stories, and representing stories. I remained open to hearing their experiences and sensory phenomenon in nature, listening respectfully to their narrations of how nature soothes them or helps them think about the meaning of life, and other elements of thought, emotion, or belief their stories manifested. A narrative inquiry must remain truly open to learning without judgment or preconceptions.

### **Quality and Credibility**

To explain the criteria I used for quality and credibility, I returned to Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) assertion that “narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field” (p. 42). Given this, I sought to establish credibility by employing the following criteria: prolonged engagement, which was proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and crystallization, which was introduced by Richardson (2000). Additionally, I employed elements of Patton’s (2015) “Artistic and

Evocative Criteria,” appropriate for artistic and narrative inquiry, specifically creativity, embeddedness in lived experience, and distinction and expressiveness of voice (p. 687).

### **Prolonged Engagement and Member Checks**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend prolonged engagement to ensure that my reconstruction of participants’ stories is a faithful representation of their views. Because COVID-19 restrictions precluded face-to-face engagements, this process was challenging; however to ensure that I accomplished coming alongside, I used the interview time not just to ask questions, but to engage dialogically in a give and take both with narrators and their field texts which wove our stories together into conversation and allowed for two-way question and answer. I benefitted from having previously engaged in prolonged engagement in the field with the other narrators: we had already camped together, participated in multi-day cycling and snowshoeing events. We had hiked together, rowed and kayaked together, and shared stories around campfires about outdoor adventures. I was able to make abundant use of what I already knew about these women’s stories not only as points of departure but as foundations to guide my questions. These previous engagements acted as a “scope” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304) which sharpened my ability to listen and visualize as they shared their stories. At times, I could vividly recall the colors, sounds, and fragrances their stories evoked because they resided, however differently, in my memories as well. After the interviews, as well as after analysis and writing up drafts, I conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and narrators had ample opportunity to examine transcript text.

### **Crystallization**

Richardson (2000) asserted that crystallization serves as a replacement for triangulation as a criterion of quality, important for a range of narrative and creative inquiries:

[T]he central image for ‘validity’ for postmodern texts is not the triangle –a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionality, and angles of approach.... Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. (p. 934)

I examined the data from teachers’ narratives from multiple angles (commonplaces). I did not put forth findings as truth, but rather, as Richardson describes, as “thoroughly partial understandings of the topic” which seek to create “new sense of meaning and significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42) of how women educators have experienced and embraced nature in their own, unique ways.

### **Artistic and Evocative Quality Criteria**

My study relies on quality criteria that is aligned with artistic and narrative inquiries. “From the perspective of artistic and evocation qualitative inquirers, great qualitative studies should evoke both understandings (cognition) and feelings (emotions)” (Patton, 2015, p. 687). Patton argues that it not possible to understand a human being without also understanding emotion. Emotions “cut to the core of people” and define the “core meaning of who they are” (Denzin, 2009, pp. 1-2). Foundational to this study was to present findings and discoveries full of feeling, sensuality, and visceral, emotional connections and memories. To consider the data in its fullest form, it was important to be able to include these feeling elements. I therefore employed artistic criteria in order to “provide an experience with the findings where ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ is understood to have a *feeling dimension* that is every bit as important as the cognitive dimension” (Denzin, 2009, emphasis in the original).

## **Transferability**

Narrative inquiry is at its heart about considering and answering puzzles. Researchers do not answer such puzzles with summative statements, but rather with questions which bring deeper insight, more nuanced understanding, and which launch further research into the puzzle. Phenomena in the study have therefore been afforded thick descriptions (Patton, 2015) which flesh out context, temporality, etc. such that participants and readers are offered a comprehensive and multifaceted presentation of information. Additionally, I described my research design and implementation, the details of data gathering, and a reflexive account of the processes of the study so that it could inform further research (Shenton, 2004).

## **Fully Informed Consent**

I gave due diligence to the recruitment process, wherein participants were given full liberty to refuse to participate in any portion of the interviews. I took care to review the consent form with potential narrators and emphasized the risks and benefits of participation. We fully discussed participant rights and matters of confidentiality.

## ***Step-by-Step Process***

Before proceeding, I secured approval from my dissertation committee. I conducted a pilot interview in 2019 and secured full approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this inquiry in 2021. Potential narrators were recruited via email and in-person requests, and I apprised them ahead of time of the general trajectory of the study, the study's purpose, as well as its duration, methods, risks, and benefits (Kim, 2016). For this, I was guided by resources which delineate robust descriptions of member checks and member meanings, including informing them how I might use their stories in future publications and presentations. I assured them that they were under no compulsion to answer questions which made them feel uncomfortable, and

that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The first round of interviews took approximately two months, beginning in January and concluding in March of 2021. I then took an additional month to listen to the tapes, to transcribe, to participate in reflecting, and to conduct preliminary analysis. I then returned to participants with follow-up questions and interviews. I concluded the final rounds of interviews in June of 2021.

### **Confidentiality**

I made every effort to protect the confidentiality of the stories my participants share in this dialogic study. Place names and group names in their stories were changed, and each narrator was given a pseudonym. I worked to prevent deductive disclosure (Kim, 2016), or wording information such that the identity of the person can be deduced by readers. Their data files were locked and encrypted, and no one had access to them except for my advisor and me. Data files were destroyed upon completion of the study.

### **My Positionality**

I came to this study with strong beliefs regarding the value of time spent with/in nature. First, I believe that nature has the capacity to teach in ways that are different from and at times superior to ways that humans teach one another. Secondly, I believe that sufficient time spent in nature has the capacity to nourish and restore physical and psychological health in unique and powerful ways. Additionally, I believe that nature is a testament to intelligent design, and that spending time in nature is a way to know, understand, and worship its Creator. Last, and because of all these previously-mentioned beliefs, I believe that adults in general and educators specifically should introduce younger generations to nature and do their utmost to protect it on their behalf. This positionality is evident in the personal narratives I included about my experiences and appeared to be relevant to other teachers in the study as well.

In terms of my family positionality, I have three grown children whom I have taught to love the outdoors. I travel to see them, and we frequently use that time to engage in outdoor activities. My outdoor self is directly linked to the ongoing connectedness I feel with my children. I now live alone, which affords me more free time to explore outdoors in ways and times of my choosing. In terms of my professional and institutional positionality, I am a full-time teacher who spends her working hours indoors and away from natural light and elements of nature almost entirely. I feel at odds with the public-school system in which I work over my attempts to reflect the pedagogy of nature in my teaching, as it has been common practice to deny requests to take students outside and “away from” the classroom. My economic positionality reflects my role as a single public-school teacher who has made what some might consider to be drastic adjustments to my lifestyle so that I can live simply and afford to purchase outdoor gear. My positionality in coming alongside friends who acted as narrators: I hold these women in the highest of regard, and their words have and do influence my thinking and beliefs. I, too, was changed by this work (Patton, 2015).

### **Data Analysis and the Presentation of Chapters IV through VI**

As a qualitative researcher, I understand that data analysis is never finished. Michael Patton (2015) wrote that “complete analysis isn’t” (p. 519). Facets will never cease to arise from data, or in the case of my study, narrative accounts of experiences, as people tell and re-tell stories, and continue to make sense of them, as they story their lives. Understanding of phenomena will grow and change *ad infinitum*. This truth informs the posture of the researcher, who is best served to see herself always as a learner, rather than the learned, no matter how long or how well she has studied her data.

As detailed above, because data is collected dialogically over a span of time while the researcher dwells in the field with participants/narrators, data gathering in narrative research is referred to as field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry refers to the process of examining and analyzing data as the stage of moving from "field texts to research texts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 119). Research texts are writings created by the researcher as she begins to "pull forward narrative threads and patterns" from field texts (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 84). At this point, the researcher begins to look for tensions (Clandinin & Huber, 2006), or moments when stories manifest conflicts, contradictions, struggles, multiple perspectives, and the like. Within these tensions or multiplicities lie rich "inquiry spaces" that hold potential for bringing deeper understanding into topics of research. Clandinin et al. (2009) use the analogy of a geode to explain the value of tensions in narrative inquiry. The geode (story) appears smooth and perhaps even a bit uninteresting on the outside, but as one examines it closely and peers into the cracks, the myriad of shapes, colors, textures that are the true beauty of the geode become visible. The tensions in stories, then, are the cracks. Together, the researcher and the narrators can examine the places in stories where multiplicity, ambivalence, and tensions arise, and thereby reveal new nuances and layers of meaning to stories they share.

### ***What is Nature? Narrators' Indigenous Definitions and Paradigms***

An excellent example of a "geode" arising in the study came in my first conversation with Cathy (pseudonym), one of the narrators. Early in our conversation, Cathy asked for my definition of "nature." Her question seemed to reveal an assumption that all the narrators would define nature as I did. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) caution researchers against presenting "static taxonomies" of terms (p. 129). In a constructionist, interpretivist narrative study, the imposition of one fixed definition of nature could have resulted in contorting the narrators'



stories into “events as what they are not” (Emerson, et al., 2011, p. 131). In exposing this blind spot at the outset of the data collection, Cathy and I were able to “peer into the cracks,” consider multiplicities, and see new layers of meaning in our own story and each other’s story as well.

In this study, I followed Clandinin’s model of first creating interim research texts (Clandinin & Huber, 2006), a first round of analyzing field texts to pull forward threads and themes from the stories. Interim research texts were tentative; I examined and negotiated them with participants, opening space to continue stories and illuminate further tensions. Here, too, the interim research texts were “intended to be marked by cracks and fissures, inviting participants to say more when plotlines seem incoherent, where there are gaps and silences in those in-between spaces” (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 84).

I analyzed the stories by considering both experiences that made up the story content and how they were told. I looked for instances in which Dewey’s doing and undergoing emerge in narrators’ stories, and examine intersections and departures in common themes. As noted earlier, I analyzed field texts for examples of the commonplaces: temporality, sociality, and place. I looked, for example, for texts in which temporality had tugged on stories and shaded their perspective. Because stories I tell tend to take on a different hue when told in retrospect; I looked for this phenomenon in the other participants’ stories and considered how time spent remembering the event may have introduced “morals to the story,” “lessons learned,” or other narrative twists and addendums. Similarly, I analyzed texts to consider influencing factors such as gender and place-based identities on women teachers who venture outside. I took all data collected and synthesized and transformed it until it rendered findings (Humble & Radina, 2019) and sifted through the “noise” to find the “signal” (Patton, 2015, p. 521).

While honoring indigenous concepts (Patton, 2015, p. 543), I considered sensitizing concepts (p. 545) and exogenous meanings (Emerson et al., 2011) which I had introduced into the framing of the study. Humble and Radina (2019) remind the researcher that, rather than themes emerging from the data, they instead ‘emerge from the researcher’s mind’ (Kindle location 630) as she interacts with the texts. Reissman (1993) concurs, writing that the researcher is an “active agent” in the co-creation of texts’ and stories’ meaning (p. 14). I therefore exercised reflexivity throughout the analysis stage in the form of research logs and narrative memos to ensure I was not imposing my own meanings upon member terms, nor inappropriately assigning themes to data in ways members did not intend. To honor indigenous concepts, I at times used *in vivo* language and emic phrasing as section headings. For example, one section heading is titled, “Be prepared. It will change your life.” This is a direct *in vivo* quote from an interview. Rather than introducing exogenous conclusions or groupings, the narrators’ words lead the reader more seamlessly into the mental and emotional nuances that narrative can so powerfully elicit.

### **Presentation of Chapters IV through VI**

In Chapter IV, I open the floor to the narrators’ voices. As much as possible, I let their own words flow freely and occasionally use *in vivo* terms for headings and subheadings. I avoid delving into themes and theories in Chapter IV, reserving those for examination in Chapters V and VI. In Chapter V, I consider themes arising across the narrators’ stories. In Chapter VI, I analyze the themes and findings from the research to raise “questions worth asking,” to consider the broader implications of the findings, and to recommend further research.

### **Limitations**

There was a limited geographical scope of this study. Participants were women who teach or have taught in or near Stillwater, Oklahoma. Participants were likewise limited in racial and class diversity. No participant identifies as a race other than White or falls outside of the Pew Research Center's standard for a middle-class designation for income (Bennet, Fry, & Kochhar, 2020). None of the participants had a serious physical disability, an element which could significantly shift meanings and understandings illuminated through this research. Although there were many advantages of conducting an inquiry with people I knew well, it is possible that I might have encountered different understandings and nuances of nature by including people that I did not previously know.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter further explicated and clarified my methodology of narrative inquiry, a popular, diverse, and now global set of approaches. It problematized complexities of the methodology so that I could consider ethical matters with thoughtfulness and care. This chapter delineated the research methods consistent with narrative inquiry, and explained how I used each method in conducting this inquiry. In this chapter, I also put forth my own positionality, and explained the processes I would utilize to analyze the data (field texts) from this study. I detailed the layout of Chapters IV, V, and VI.

## CHAPTER IV

### NARRATORS' STORIES

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I detail the stories of the narrators whose experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and narrations informed this work. I will first introduce each narrator with a brief story of my own, a story of an experience I've shared with each of them outdoors, from my perspective, reflecting the relational nature of narrative inquiry. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to the stories from their perspectives as I came alongside them (Clandinin 2006) on multiple occasions, sharing and re-sharing experiences during this study. The reader will therefore encounter each narrator twice; first through a story I relate about each woman, and again, later in the chapter, as I relate the stories they shared with me from their own perspectives.

Honoring the narrators, the narrators' experiences conveyed through stories, and the emic (insider) meanings of the stories was a priority in this chapter. Nevertheless, although I have given the floor to the narrators' voices as fully as possible in this chapter, it is also true that narrative inquiry is ultimately a "collaboration between researcher and participants," (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). I chose the quotes to include, highlight, and analyze. I chose the key passages to represent each narrator, and as importantly, I chose which passages would *not* be included. Resultantly, the field texts are not and cannot be entirely free of my perspectives and beliefs. Researcher presence in this chapter aligns with Clandinin's model of narrative inquiry, and it is important to state this explicitly. In spite of this, because giving each narrator a space for

expression was important, I have foregrounded member terms, emic perspectives, and “indigenous concepts” (Patton, 2015, p. 543) in this chapter to allow readers to become acquainted with the narrators. I seldom interrupted or interjected extraneous theory into their individual stories. In Chapters V and VI, however, I will examine themes across their stories through theoretical lenses salient to this work.

The narrators’ stories pulled in other narrators from the study on occasion. Additionally, their stories and my own intersected and diverged. Although this presented writing challenges, in the end it proved to be a more organic representation of the nature of narratives themselves; they tangle and untangle as people enter and exit the story line. Because this study layered a serious academic endeavor with personal familiarity, I paid careful attention to both sides of that balance and remained ever cognizant that narrative inquiry is, “at its heart, an ethical undertaking. It matters if, and how, we tell our stories and listen to others’ stories in narrative inquiry. If, and how, we listen can influence, can shape, the lives of both listeners and tellers” (Clandinin, Claire, & Lessard, 2018, p. 2).

This group of women educators all knew each other prior to this study. Despite their bond of friendship and shared interests, they held a rich variety of beliefs, opinions, and stories. The six other narrators in this study, to whom I gave the pseudonyms Ginny, Cathy, Liz, Nicole, Steph, and Susan, currently work or have worked as educators across 35 years respectively. Their fields of teaching range from math to science with expertise ranging from early childhood to adult education. This study did not, cannot, recount all the influences that these women have had upon me and upon one another as we have communed with/in nature together, told our stories, and shared bits of knowledge as we moved step by step along a trail, pedaled miles on Oklahoma backroads, and, at times, hunkered down to brave untoward elements. Our narratives

indicated that we have shaped each other's lives with each encounter, no matter how brief, and thus the narratives build *ad infinitum*, into and beyond this study. The existing relationships and prior shared experiences had already prepared the soil of the study ahead of time.

In Chapters V and VI, I use the narratives I describe in this chapter to discuss common themes and broader implications. I do not intend to present “distillations of maxims that can serve as a direct guide for our actions” (Clandinin, Claire, & Lessard, 2018, p. 209). This is not a focus of narrative inquiry. The following stories are instead “performative works whose entire arc, from start to finish, sensitize the reader to questions worth asking” (Clandinin, Claire, & Lessard, 2018, p. 209). I will revisit, describe, and address those questions in Chapter VI.

## **Part 1: My Introductions to Narrators**

### **An Introduction to Steph: My Story**

Steph teaches in a public K-12 school. She is a jolly, kindhearted soul; the sort of teacher I would have loved for my own children to have when they were young because she brings mirth into the classroom which puts her students at ease. Steph enjoys sharing new ideas for enriching educational experiences with colleagues and regularly takes time out of her schedule to pass along helpful information. I first came to know Steph when we travelled together to an educational conference the first year I moved to Stillwater. Over the course of our conversation, we discovered we were both cyclists. Previously, I had mostly cycled alone, both in Stillwater and my previous town, since I didn't know anyone else who rode. Steph's face lit up as she told me about a group of women in the area who cycled together, then she offered to invite me to join their Facebook group. I had no idea how much that offer would alter the trajectory of my life.

### ***The Blue Skies Women's Cycling Group***

A notification on my Facebook account soon alerted me that I had been invited to join a group called the Blue Skies Women's Cycling Group (pseudonym, hereafter Blue Skies). The cover photo was a group of women in matching cycling jerseys, standing next to their bikes and smiling radiantly, victoriously. I didn't recognize anyone, but the joy in their faces was magnetic and intoxicating. I accepted the invitation and soon joined in on my first ride. The casual banter as we rolled down the roads which circle town were a gift to me. I was still new in town and really hadn't made many friends. These seemed like just the sort of women I wanted to know better. They were smart, knowledgeable, kind, and quick to laugh. There was no sense of competition or need for speed or technical riding like some cycling groups foster.

We were only a few miles into the ride when my rear tire went flat. I had never had a flat tire and had no idea what to do. I didn't know anything about carrying a repair kit and felt embarrassed at my own ignorance. The other riders were kind and did not judge my lack of preparedness. One of the women brought her own tools over to try and inflate the tire. When that failed, the others stepped in quickly, offering to fetch a car to carry my bike back into town or to wait with me. I was humbled that they would show such kindness to a stranger.

From that day and with the help of the women in the group, I began learning about bike repair. As I continued to ride with the group, I learned not only about cycling, but about their adventures on and off the bike. Group rides led to gatherings for coffee, camping trips, traveling, and friendships I came to value as a great treasure. For the last five years, we have laughed together, cried together, and supported one another when the chips were down. We've gone on adventures in nature and shared the concomitant fears and exhilarations. Each in her own way has been a great inspiration to me, but none more so than Ginny.

### **An Introduction to Ginny: My Story**

The first time I met Ginny, I witnessed a gentle vitality that seemed to endear her to everyone around her. Her manner reminded me of a quote I had learned years prior: *Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*: gentle in manner, resolute in action. Though she was not boisterous and did not seek to be the center of attention, I realized quickly that she was central to the Blue Skies group. Ginny is quietly attentive to others, observant in the kind of way that seeks to help when and where needed with no need for approbation or recognition. I later learned that Ginny was an accomplished early childhood educator, which seemed fitting, given what I had already seen of her caring heart. She served in both teaching and administrative capacities, wrote state-level early childhood education curriculum, and mentored preservice teachers. I also found that, true to my suspicion, many people indeed dearly loved and respected her. In the years that I've known her, I've seen her implacable optimism and generosity of spirit manifested in myriad ways. My friendship with Ginny began as I joined the Blue Skies group, but it wasn't until Ginny and I rode in Freewheel together during the summer of 2018 that our friendship gained real depth.

***“Be prepared. It will change your life:” Freewheel***

Oklahoma (OK) Freewheel is an annual seven-day bicycle ride across the state. Each year the ride directors choose a different route through the state. For summer 2018, they chose Route 66 from Elk City eastward to Joplin, Missouri, a distance of 425 miles. Several group members considered going, but in the end, only Steph, Ginny, and I decided to participate as riders. Steph rode with her husband, which left Ginny and I as traveling companions along the route.



**Figure 9** *The 2018 Freewheel route (Source: [www.nodroptours.com](http://www.nodroptours.com)).*



Training for the ride was complicated, to say the least. I had an older bike with cantankerous gears, but the distance Freewheel required spurred me to upgrade. The financial commitment to purchase a new bike was not an easy decision for a public-school teacher in Oklahoma, but I knew that my current bike was not up to the challenge. As I searched for a new bike, shop owners smiled when I told them I was going to participate in Freewheel for the first time. “Be prepared,” one owner told me. “It will change your life.” Her comment didn’t make much sense to me at the time. I did love cycling, but I couldn’t imagine how a bike ride could change my life. I chalked it up to friendly banter and moved on.

I had taken a full load of classes the semester prior to the ride, and many days I ended up training on an indoor cycle with a textbook perched on the handlebars. I wondered if this training would be enough to prepare me for such a long ride. The month before Freewheel began, I bought Hazel. Hazel was made of carbon fiber. She was lighter, faster, and had more gears, but differed considerably from my old bike, and therefore came with a learning curve. Every day of Freewheel would be a new distance record for me. I had never ridden the distances that any single day required, let alone combined such distances in consecutive riding days, and on a new bike no less. I was so nervous, I didn’t sleep for days leading up to the event.

Ginny had participated in Freewheel previously, and I was thankful to be riding alongside someone who was more knowledgeable than I was and full of encouragement and humor – two things, I realized quickly, we both would need. In addition, Ginny knew a wealth of facts about the flora and fauna that we rolled past. We talked about crops as we rode beside wheat fields, blooming seasons as we rolled past wildflowers, and the variety of trees we encountered along the way. She demonstrated quail calls and told me stories about using them to call in birds when she had been out in the field during a hunt.

The enormity of the effort and concomitant challenges were ever present. On day two from Weatherford to El Reno, I made it only four miles down the road when my right contact blew out of my eye. My gear was already on the truck on route to the next town, so I had to ride that 56-mile leg with only one eye in focus. Ginny kept my humor up by regaling me with tales of stealth camping next to hidden lakes and gravel rides on Oklahoma red dirt roads.

**Figure 10** *The warm and sometimes humorous welcome by the towns that hosted the cyclists made for a happy end to the long and challenging journey each day, and encouraged us to get back on the bike another day (2018).*



I was already sore from having ridden 50 miles the day prior, but when we arrived in El Reno, Ginny and I rewarded ourselves with Sid's Onion Burgers, a feast which, combining the appetite we had worked up and the actual deliciousness of food, still finds its way into my stories

with the verbal accolade “best meal of my entire life.” Ginny and I sat in complete silence, consuming our food like human augers. After the extra-large double cheeseburgers, fries, and chocolate shakes had vanished, we looked at one another and burst out laughing. The two women who had not stopped talking since they got on their bikes that morning had not said a single word through the whole meal.

**Figure 11** *Hedonistic delights at Sid’s at the end of day two. The 56 miles we had ridden to earn this meal allowed the calories to be consumed without apology (2018).*



On day three of the ride, I wore two pairs of padded bike shorts in an attempt to mitigate the pain from the nascent saddle sores. This was wildly unsuccessful and seemed only to make things worse. The ups and downs were both the metaphorical and literal sort, as we struggled up the highways of the hillier regions along the roads of Oklahoma. Ginny will be the first to confess that she is not a morning person, yet on the longest leg of 81-miles from Catoosa to Miami, we headed out at 4:45 a.m. in the predawn darkness to avoid the predicted >100-degree afternoon temperatures.

Every vista was a new work of multisensory art. I began to identify the varied fragrances of wheat fields among other types of crops, prairie tallgrass, and wildflowers. I practiced

identifying birds by their calls and found that, unlike Ginny, I was wholly unskilled at replicating them myself. On day four, a severe thunderstorm emerged from nowhere. In a matter of minutes, the wind gusts surged to more than 40 miles per hour, and the sky transformed from brilliant blue to an angry cauldron gray visibly spinning right above our heads. To our left was a school building, but it was summer break, which lessened the odds of finding an open door. “Any port in a storm,” I shouted to her as we pushed into the parking lot and up to the front door. Thankfully, a kindhearted administrator not only let us come in, but let us bring our bikes inside as well. Soon other cyclists joined us. There our soaked and bedraggled group waited out the worst of the storm. While the rainwater from our bodies and our bikes dripped all over the tile of his foyer, the administrator came around offering smiles and bottles of water. The spontaneous kindness of the gesture was truly touching.

By the end of that seven-day ride, Ginny and I had formed a bond that has held fast since. Ginny not only completed the seven-day, 425-mile Freewheel journey, but at the ride’s end in Joplin, MO, she joined Bike Across Missouri, that state’s counterpart to Freewheel, and kept going another 5 days and 304 miles, bringing her totals to 12 days and 729 miles. I marveled at her tenacity and endurance, but I had learned that, though gentle in spirit, Ginny was a very determined woman. Had I not had Ginny as a traveling companion on the trans-Oklahoma ride, I don’t think I would have been able to finish. She lent me her strength when mine ran short.

**Figure 12** *Ginny pointing at me. This photo was taken during our 7-day journey on OK Freewheel. I love this picture because it demonstrates Ginny's selflessness and optimism beautifully (2018).*



I finished the ride exhausted but victorious. I had learned the difference between a mile of highway in a car and a mile of highway on a bicycle, and they were worlds apart. “Miles weren’t things that blazed dully past,” as Cheryl Strayed (2012) recounted of her journey on the Pacific Crest Trail; “They were long, intimate straggles of weeds and clumps of dirt, blades of grass and flowers that bent in the wind, trees that lumbered and screeched” (p. 191). The smell, sound, and feel of nature became normal, and when I returned home, the air conditioning felt metallic against my skin and the ceiling felt low and dark. Not long after, the local newspaper ran a story about Freewheel which featured select stories. The reporter contacted me while she was working on the story to ask some questions. I was still processing the magnitude of the whole week, and wasn’t sure if I could communicate its impact. The one statement I knew to be true and could make emphatically, however, was one she chose to print: “When I face a challenge now, I think, ‘if I can ride 425 miles, I can do this, too.’” (Hart, 2018, p. A2). The bike shop owner had been right. Freewheel had changed my life.

**Figure 13** Hazel and I. The ride along Route 66 proved to be a rolling history lesson (2018).



### **An Introduction to Nicole: My Story**

Nicole and I joined the Blue Skies group at about the same time. She had been a long-time teacher at a local elementary school, and we easily struck up a conversation. Nicole is a self-professed adrenaline junkie, and enjoys activities in nature that I would likely not be brave enough to attempt. She is quicker to smile than almost anyone I've ever met. Nicole, Ginny, Liz, and I took off to New Mexico one snowy January weekend to snowshoe in Red River. None of us had ever snowshoed before, but strengthened by the willingness of the others, we plunged in. Undeterred by the zero-degree temperatures and two feet of snow, Nicole marched outside our cabin the first morning to see how deep the snow was. I looked outside the window to see her up to her thighs in snow, a depth that gave me pause, but not Nicole, who was freefalling backward into the snow drifts.

Soon we were all outside, stomping around and making snow angels. Nicole's blend of quick thinking, humor, and pragmatic problem-solving skills were a gift to the group that

weekend. Nicole and I have hiked, biked, and camped together many times since we met, and each time I am with her, I learn something new.

**Figure 14** *Outdoor thermometer on the front stoop of our Red River cabin (2018).*



**Figure 15** *Nicole, undeterred by the snow (2018).*



### **An Introduction to Liz: My Story**

I had been riding with the Blue Skies group for a few weeks when they invited me to a sunrise ride along the Cimarron River south of town. I had met all the women who joined the ride that day except one, Liz. Liz had been instrumental in growing the Blue Skies group since its inception. I had heard the other women speak warmly about Liz's contagious energy, and they seemed excited that I was finally going to meet her. Though we set out quickly that morning, we stopped mid-route to take in the sunrise coming up over the river. That was when I first saw Liz. With her bike leaned against the bridge over the Cimarron, Liz threw her head back, her arms out, and lit the sky with her radiant smile. She was stunning, magnetic, bigger

than life, her joy jumping the banks of her body and overflowing all around her, and I knew I needed to get to know this woman.

Some weeks later, several of us participated in an organized 5-kilometer run near Liz’s house, where we had brunch thereafter. I finally got the chance to get better acquainted with her. That morning I learned that she too was a teacher who worked in higher education. She was articulate and insightful, expressing genuine interest in every person in the room. She was warm and kind, excelling as a host in every way. Since that time, my friendship with Liz has become a treasured relationship in my life. The joyful, intelligent woman I saw her to be that day has proven to be who she is day after day.

**Figure 16** *“The Lake Effect.” Liz, Nicole, and I at sunset on Lake Carl Blackwell (Cathy, 2021).*



### *Stories that Tangle and Untangle*

Liz was serving as a route volunteer during the seven days of Freewheel in 2018 and offered me a ride to the starting point in Elk City. During the two-and-a-half-hour, 170-mile ride



from Stillwater to Elk City, I learned that Liz had participated in Freewheel several times. She shared stories about Freewheel that day which also emerged during the study. As a nervous and underprepared first-time participant, I was grateful for her wealth of knowledge and advice. Resultantly, I was able to roll out on that first morning full of hope and excitement.

As a volunteer, Liz drove out early each morning to set up an aid station along the gravel route. She was there for the first rider, then waited sometimes under a blistering sun throughout the day to serve each one down to the last. As tired riders came through, Liz chatted warmly with them, offered encouragement and a cold drink. The term “trail angels” has been used to describe people who offer such support along the way, and with good cause. There was more than one occasion when Liz saved the day for a rider. The following spring, she offered to be my support person for a gravel ride I participated in locally. She met me halfway along the route, wiped down and refilled my dusty water bottles, and brought me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich feast. Liz was again the consummate trail angel, offering words of encouragement and wisdom that came from a deep place of knowing. She had not only participated in that event previously, she had ridden the longer route, twice the distance I was going that day, 107 miles of terrain so wet and unforgiving that she carried her bike for seven of them. “Soak it up, breathe it in,” she told me. “It’s hard, but it’s beautiful.” I was humbled and grateful for her selfless generosity, but not surprised. It was who I knew her to be.

### **An Introduction to Susan: My Story**

I met Susan for the first time when we canvassed neighborhoods together to help a local candidate who was running for office. As we walked the streets and knocked on doors, we talked about politics. She was well-informed and passionate about important issues such as gun control

and voting rights. I've since come to know her as a highly-educated woman with tireless energy for political reform, yet with a laid-back, approachable demeanor and great sense of humor.

### ***DFL***

I became more acquainted with Susan in October of 2019, when she, Liz, and I participated in an organized cycling event in Ponca City. None of the three of us had been cycling much at that time, and each felt physically underprepared for the event. Resultantly, we chose the shortest route of 25 miles. As we rolled out, our pace fell into a naturally slow roll, so that soon most riders were well out of sight. Rather than being bothered by it, we decided to embrace the slowness and enjoy every nuance of the sunshine and clouds on the fields of northern Oklahoma. We stopped to pet dogs, take pictures, and look at flowers. The firefighters in the town of Blackwell had generously set up an aid station with a snack buffet of cookies, brownies, crispy rice treats, and drinks for the riders that day. Rather than rush through as we might on another day, Liz, Susan, and I stayed and chatted with the firefighters casually for some time, and were even given a tour of one of the fire trucks.

By the last ten miles of the ride, we were being passed by the fastest riders from the group who had ridden the 50-mile route. We arrived at the finish line “DFL,” a colloquialism used among athletes to denote the person who finishes an event dead last; the “f” an abbreviation for irreverent profanity. Remembering the ride later through stories, each of us has commented how much we enjoyed that ride explicitly because we slowed down and allowed ourselves to forget about time and performance and just be fully, slowly, in the moment.

### **Part 2: Their Stories**

In this section, I open the floor to the narrators' voices. As much as possible, I let their own words flow freely and use in vivo terms for headings and subheadings where I can. I insert

extended quotes from the narrators' stories in block quotes in italics, so that their words stand apart from mine. As noted in the introduction, I am present in the field texts which follow, using a light touch to organize data purposefully to convey themes. Each story surface subtle themes about each woman. Additionally, I surface through my inductive organization of these stories themes/ideas that capture core aspects of women's stories. I avoid imposing exogenous meanings in this section and reserve attention to explicit themes and theories for examination in Chapters V and VI.

### **Ginny's Stories**

#### ***The Apple Tree: "My space, my connection, my place, my peace."***

As a young girl, Ginny and her family moved frequently. "I was in more elementary schools than grades," she recalled. Resultantly, Ginny struggled to feel connected to a place. The exception was her grandmother Teresa's home, where she, her mother, and her three sisters visited from time to time.

*We lived far away from her, but whenever we would go visit, she had apple trees in the backyard. Being the oldest of four girls, I was the only one that could climb up to the branches. I was tall enough. So my peaceful place was to take my books, which I loved reading, take my books and climb up to that lowest branch. I could reach it and get to it and pull off a green apple, and my grandmother would let me take a salt shaker. So I'd have my green apple and my salt shaker and my book, and nobody could reach me. It still just brings me such joy, thinking about being in that tree. It was always a sense of release from tension and absolute connection with place, which didn't happen very often. It was my space, my connection, my place, my peace. Nature to me was a place of absolute freedom, of calm, of creativity. And I didn't have anybody else's voice and none of the tension coming into my world.*

There in the tree that only she could reach, Ginny found a place where she could connect to an inner peace, to her grandmother, and to the place itself.

#### ***Grandmother's Magic Seeds***

Ginny's Grandmother Teresa, whom Ginny described as "tiny but mighty," had been an only child. "I could tell she was a lonely person in her childhood, and nature was her place also. I remember thinking that I could identify with that." Teresa grew beautiful flowers around her home, often from seeds that she gathered from her adventures out into nature. "To me, it was like magic," Ginny remembered, "how you could know what you could bring back, and then take seeds and grow them in your own place."

Ginny's grandfather passed away in his early 50s, and Teresa pressed on and raised their five girls alone. "She just took the bull by the horns and lived life in a large way." Ginny remembered her grandmother describing a canoe trip she had taken with another woman and a guide in the backwoods of Canada.

*I just thought that was the most risky, challenging thing for two women to go and do in the backcountry. At that time period, women didn't do those kinds of things. First of all, they didn't go outside very much, nor did they go out on big, bad adventures with other women. And she brought back wild daisy seeds, and planted them in her backyard in her garden. Every year we would look at those daisies coming up, and be reminded of that big adventure. And I knew all my life, all my life, I'm going to be like that. That's who I want to be.*

### ***Fully in the Moment***

That narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005) of "magic seeds" stayed with Ginny as she grew, and as an adult, has made good on that dream. She became an educator specializing in early childhood education. She met and befriended Nadia, an early childhood educator who lives in another country. In a Skype conversation one day, Nadia invited Ginny to take a coast-to-coast trip across America with her. "I think it took me like two seconds, and I was like, yes, yes, I'll do it." Ginny and Nadia agreed on one condition from the beginning.

*There was an absolute knowing that we wanted no itinerary, that every day when we got up, wherever we were, we would go wherever our hearts led us to go. And when we got there, because there was no plan, our biggest intention was to live fully in the moment, to*

*meet with people or be in nature, and fully be a participant of that place. It was a beautiful experience.*

Ginny picked Nadia up at the San Francisco airport, and the two women set out a coast-to-coast adventure that at times pushed Ginny to the edges of her boundaries. Since they followed no plan and no map, they sometimes ventured so far out onto public lands that they really had no way of knowing exactly where they were. Some places had no water or provisions. They filled up water containers when they found sources and hoped they would last to the next stop. “We would go out with a blessing and a prayer, and basically whatever happened, happened. We were always taken care of. It was always okay. But there were places where it was some nail biting.” On one occasion, Ginny and Nadia were hiking during rut season when they encountered a bull moose. Nadia had had no previous experience with moose, but Ginny was a seasoned hunter, and knew the moose was acting aggressively.

*He was coming up, and he was not happy, and he was trailing us. We were able to get behind some trees and then scurry down. I'm thinking, “oh, I hope we don't die.” So, the whole time, living on the edge, moment to moment, whether in the vehicle or making the choice to go into a land that has no roads. And you don't know what it looks like on the other side. But when you have those heightened sensory experiences which allow you to take it moment by moment and become keenly, keenly aware of who you are, where you are and what's going on, that gets you to the next moment. It's addictive.*

***“In 30 minutes, I can be gone for an adventure.”***

Ginny credits her friendships within the Blue Skies group for helping her to better understand her capacities and capabilities. Being a part of an active group that is continually looking for the next adventure, Ginny has organized her gear so that she can easily join in on a trek into nature.

*I can go in minutes. I have three sizes of bags with essentials. One is bike packing, and it has just the essentials for an overnight that I can throw in my back pocket. If I grab my sleeping bag, I can go overnight anywhere. And then I have another one for travel that I always keep packed fresh, ready to go. And if someone asked me, do you want to go for a weekend or three days or whatever? In 30 minutes, I can be gone for an adventure.*

### ***Embracing the tensions***

Ginny has come to value experiencing “tensions” in nature. When she works through difficult situations, she learns and grows. From time to time, therefore, she intentionally creates scenarios which require her to make tough calls or spur-of-the-moment decisions. For example, she and her husband Glen have taken weekend trips without an agenda or destination.

*At the end of the driveway, we would choose if we were going right or left and then just make it up as we went along. But there is such a peace, and it's so calming, at the same time it's all those opposites. It's calming, and it's terribly exciting. It's no stress, and then there are moments of deep stress when you don't know where you're going to camp, or are we in a safe place? I don't know. You go from brain activity to deep, intuitive activity. You have the time to really, really connect. It's these extreme opposites that we live as humans along the way.*

Ginny noted that her stories have grown as she has grown, and are fuller with meaning upon introspection and passage of time. New temporal contexts have given her stories richer, deeper hues (Crites, 1971).

*When you live in the moment, you don't have time to make the story. You're living the experience, and then you go back and you look and, you can even draw up some of those same emotions, that same fear, you know. You can feel it right then and there, but you have a bigger context. The story at almost 65 is different than the story I would've pulled together at 15. You know, you've changed, you and I have a bigger context, more knowing, more time to experience those same emotions over and over and over in different places. Sometimes with different people, sometimes alone. The feelings don't change, but the context does. So then your story just gets bigger and bigger and all the pieces come into it. That story has chapters instead of just one short novel.*

Dewey’s ideas on continuity of experience enrich my understanding of Ginny’s “chapters of her story” as I saw in her narratives the “fluid and contextual” events flowing one into the next, reaching both forward and backward, informing and influencing one another (Gibson, 2016, p. 11). Her experiences seemed to build upon the last and inform the next, adding “chapters,” nuance, and understanding to her stories.

***Before content, it’s about relationships.***

The year prior to this study, Ginny retired from her long, active career as an educator. In reminiscing about her career, she told me that she saw early childhood education and family life education as inextricable. “We're all educators, in different forms and formats,” she said. Ginny wrote state-level curricula for birth through age three, as well as parent education curricula, and led training seminars on early childhood education which focused first on “heart-to-heart” relationships.

*That's a tenet I hold onto deeply, that everything is seated in relationship. Before content, it's about relationships. As a child, that came from the heart, and then experiences, and then I took it into my profession, and then I shared it with others as part of a profession in a mentoring experience, you know? So it's building relationships, just like you build a relationship with nature.*

The curriculum that Ginny designed was informed heavily by her belief that young children's connection to nature is a vital one.

*So much of the work and the curriculum and the programs we ... or I designed and implemented were nature-based, because I feel so strongly that that is a serious and very important relationship for young children and their families. It changes moods; it changes interests. Learning doesn't begin without wonder at first. And where do we find more wonder than in nature? So nature-based programs and implementation, even classrooms set up in the field were really informative in our curriculum development. And then in all of our teacher trainings also, that was probably a large bulk of what we did.*

### ***Loose Parts***

In our conversations, Ginny referred several times to “loose parts.” She spoke of nature's abundance of loose parts, and its ability to inspire wonder through them. When I asked her to explain this idea in greater detail, Ginny told me that her work in early childhood education had been influenced by Architect Simon Nicholson's (1972) Theory of Loose Parts. Loose parts are any material with which a student can move, manipulate, examine, or experiment. “The more loose parts, things that are not fixed, the more interesting the environment,” Ginny explained. “We have agency over that environment, and whatever we create.” In early childhood education,

that agency can inspire wonder and discovery, igniting learning in physics, math, language arts.

“So you can see how applicable that is to learning in nature. What child is it that picks up a stick, and it's not a stick, right? It's a sword. It's a plane, it's a boat. Nature is so rich in loose parts.”

Ginny and I swapped stories about our experiences in education. I told her that the more experiences I have in nature, the more I long to open that world up to my students somehow. I haven't carried my interest in nature into the classroom as much as I would like. Hers was a different story.

*You know, my interest and background in hunting and conservation was carried into the classroom with young children, and into the curriculum. Science isn't just science to me, a list of facts or whatever. I live it, I live it, and most people do, but in different ways. So that connection with the natural environment is very much about the animals that I share that environment with. And because I hunt and because that's a main source of food for us, it also means you do some foraging and you learn about the plant area around there. And I'm listening for bird calls, and I'm expanding my knowledge of bird life, because it's something I'm really interested in, but also the bird calls, because it alerts you to dangers; things that you might need to be paying attention to, like snakes on the trail. They're squawking as you're going along or water sources, because there are certain animals that are attracted to live and forage around the water source. Well, that might be a life-saving event if you're on a trail and you get lost, you can follow the waterways down. So when you deconstruct that and you take it back to the classroom, the children are learning really pertinent relationships and how they interact as a part of nature in the world. Very symbiotic.*

Ginny also told me about her background and training in the Reggio Emilia philosophy of teaching, and its embrace of “three teachers”: the teacher, the curriculum, and the environment.

When nature is the environment, it is quite literally the teacher. After she explained this to me, I lamented to her that my own teaching experiences did not have the focus on nature that hers did.

*It is not standard practice. So I'll start there. Everything that I did either through my work or work with others in this area, we were a splinter program. It was asking questions to ask the question, “Why not?” Not why, but why not, you know, that cognitive dissonance, and in early childhood, we believe and have practiced under lots of different labels, philosophical designs and all, that everything you can do inside, meaning the typical classroom type of thinking, you can just take that outside. I have not found one thing you can't do. It may not look exactly the same and some of your materials may be different, but you're, you're teaching.*



## ***Generational Seeds***

Although Ginny has retired from the professional sphere, teaching which draws in nature continues to be a focus of her life's work. She and Glen have transformed part of the land they live on so that her six-year-old grandson, Elias, has places to explore and learn. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when Elias's school had to meet online, Ginny built him an outdoor classroom at her home.

*I've been able to utilize my work with Elias, my own personal heart and feelings and experiences and knowledge with him on our place. I created a naturescape for him out in our backyard when he was just a little bit younger, three and four, so he had a place that he could feel competent and be by himself. It has waterway areas that he could take the hose and make his own little waterways and dams and rocks to build structures, a huge dirt pile ringed in rock. So he could make mud or do whatever you wanted to do in that area. A lot of other parts and pieces that he could do while learning. We made him a track for his bike where he could go in and out of the trees and around just a circular piece that was way on the backside. So it feels like you're going way far away from the house.*

Ginny has been teaching Elias skills such as archery and how to build a fire safely. Elias began learning to gather twigs to help fuel the fire when he was two. He's helped to collect things that they will burn for the landscaping. Since he has learned fire safety successfully, his big milestone this year will be to build a fire on his own. Ginny said that Elias is aware that's the "next big thing," and he's looking forward to it.

*It's been so much fun to share my love of nature and outdoor activities with him, and he is a true naturalist. He's a better birder than I am. He can identify birds better than I can, through song. He knows a lot of birds, and it's just something dear to his heart. So it's something we can share and just delight in the natural world together. We don't have to have games. We don't have to do anything. We can step outside, and he's a happy boy, and we're happy together.*

## ***Seeds***

A seed produces life, but it also reproduces life; it gives birth to something which will produce more seeds. A seed is therefore more than just opportunity; it contains both life and the

potential to reproduce more life inside it. As I read back through transcripts of my conversations with Ginny, this beautiful metaphor emerged. I noticed an intergenerational cycle happening between Ginny's grandparents, Ginny, and her grandson. Just as the seeds that Ginny's grandmother brought back from her adventures and the tulip bulbs that her grandfather overwintered in the basement planted fascinations in her young life, now Ginny was planting seeds herself.

Even though she has retired from the professional world, Ginny is wholeheartedly invested in passing on outdoor skills and experiences to Elias. Just as a plant that takes in sunlight and water and continues to grow and make new seeds, so Ginny continues to go on new adventures, trying, learning, and growing, taking in new metaphorical sunlight and nourishment. Those rich experiences produce new seeds which she in turn plants in her grandson's life, structuring and crafting her land so that he too can try, learn, and grow. I thought about the words educators often use to gauge success: "I hope this lesson takes root," or "germinates;" all seed words. Ginny is passing on knowledge and opportunity. Yet she is also planting life, and the potential for Elias to someday plant life in future generations as well. John Dewey's writings on continuity could not be more exquisitely modeled than this.

As a part of her teaching, Ginny believes Elias should understand all sides of nature; its beauty, but also its intensity. "It gives us a connection to explain those things that are very hard to explain. It's life and death. Why are we here? And [in hunting], in processing the animal, we say a prayer, give thanks to the Lord."

*God in the Deepest Places*

As Ginny and I swapped stories of our times together outdoors, our conversation eventually came to a discussion of whether we would grow tired of our adventures, of sleeping in tents, or of strenuous hikes and bicycle rides. She was firm in her reply.

*I want to maintain the physical capabilities that I can do this until the day I drop from this earth. Or I don't just want, I need, I need to have those outdoor experiences. It literally, it fills my soul. That's the deepest places where I find God.*

## **Liz's Stories**

***“That's the beauty I want.”***

Since the day I met her, Liz seemed like the consummate outdoors person to me, so I assumed that she had spent a lifetime mastering outdoor pursuits. During our conversations for this study, however, and after having known her for more than five years, I was surprised to learn that was not the case at all. Liz's family of origin didn't spend much time outdoors at all. As a young girl, she participated in brief outings with a local Girl Scout troop once a year, but remembers the difficulty of many new and sometimes confusing rules. “Don't touch the tent sides; they leak through. Make sure you change your socks before you get into bed. Make sure you do this, make sure you do that,” she shared. All the requirements seemed overwhelming.

*It seemed like there were all of these rules that I could never know from experience. I was super grateful for the experience that these people were taking me to in order to be able to learn from them. But I knew that I couldn't learn it all in a weekend once a year. I just knew that there was something about camping that I liked, but I knew I would never grow up to do that because I didn't know enough.*

Other than the annual weekend campouts with the Girl Scout troop, Liz said that most outdoor activities she did as a child were with her Aunt Leah, whom Liz credits as being a woman passionate about making memories.

*When I did get outside as a kid, I think it always was with Aunt Leah. In my grandmother's house, there was a photograph of my aunt doing RAGBRAI, which is a bicycle ride across Iowa. And she looked so vibrant and so beautiful and so healthy. And*

*so all the way through my childhood, I kept thinking, when I grow up, that's who I want to be. That's the beauty I want.*

Her first year of teaching, Liz used the money she received from her tax return to buy a bicycle. She lived in Abilene, Texas at the time and had no family near her. She recalled that every time she went for a bike ride, she got a flat tire.

*So here I am outside doing something. I have no idea, but I want to do it bad enough. I'm willing to make mistakes, but I know that I can't get stuck five miles or 10 miles or 15 miles from my house. And I don't know, there's no collective, there's no one to learn from.*

***“That's what got me out.”***

A while later, she moved to Oklahoma to go to graduate school at the same time her parents also moved to the area. In graduate school, Liz met and befriended Lexie, with whom she traveled frequently to academic conferences. On one of their road trips to a conference, Lexie began to tell Liz about her experiences backpacking and camping. Liz was thrilled to find out that her new friend knew about those activities.

*And I'm just basically shamelessly begging her to take me with her. You know, would you please be my friend? And would you take me camping, because I want to, but I know that I have to learn from someone, and the fear of messing up or making a mess or the lack of knowledge again keeps me from doing it. And so, no, she didn't take any of my hints.*

Some time afterward, as Liz was mulling over the idea of participating in Freewheel, she met Steve. Steve was active in the local cycling community and was an advocate for cycling culture and safety. He was helping Liz's parents move from one house to the other when he spotted Liz's bicycle. “He was like a bloodhound on the hunt,” Liz recalled, “And he worked really hard to get me on that bicycle.” Steve was the person Liz had been waiting for. She finally had someone who could teach her the ins and outs of cycling.

*That's what got me out, learning and being confident and having someone to ask questions with, cause I had everything to learn. I didn't know what kind of food to eat. I didn't know, when is it okay pain? When is it not okay pain? I knew nothing.*

This mentorship and training gave Liz the courage to sign up for Freewheel, even though she had little experience riding long distance or camping, two activities the event required.

***“It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my lifetime.”***

*So I was going to have to do it by myself, and the fear of doing it by myself and not knowing that, I mean the riding 75 miles a day, and I was riding 20, 25, like I can't imagine riding 75 miles a day. Who does that? Who can do that? How does someone, you know, actually do that? Twenty miles, that's my max, right? The official first day, I think it was 75 miles. This was the first time I've ever done that. We pull up into Eric, Oklahoma, and we're on a highway, and there's no shoulder. And with every car that passes me, very busy highway, very busy highway, I'm just thinking, just hit me. Just hit me, because literally my girl parts are screaming. Like I didn't know the human body could do that.*

By the time evening came, she was reeling from exhaustion.

*We just were on the verge of tears. Let's just be honest. That's what it is. The verge of tears, the absolute, excruciating, helpless feeling of knowing that you have done something that is so stupid. Stupid, you were stupid. You were unprepared. You are dumb. You were fighting internal words like that. And the next morning you get on your bike and do it again.*

At this point in our conversation, I had to stop her and ask the question, “But you have participated in Freewheel more than once, right? So something must have happened to you, something galvanized in you or transformed in you. What happened?”

*Oh man, I met beautiful people. Unlike I've ever met. And when you get into your darkest places, people would roll up and they just knew, and they would just take care of you. There was this collective friendship that was like all of us dream of, you know, and it got me through. There were no social rules. People just show up and talk to you. I mean, it was so touching. And, so that's how every day was.*

Liz described the fatigue she felt by the last day. “I can hardly see, I'm so tired. You get so tired that it's black, and you're seeing out of a pinhole. Right? My physical body is absolutely at exhaustion level.” Although I am sympathetic to her pain, I hear the growth and transformation from the journey at that point in her words. “It is the last day. And the last days are always really short. Like they're 30 or 40 miles. They're so doable. You can do it in your

sleep.” The woman who at the outset had questioned her ability to ride more than 25 miles at a time now spoke of riding 30 or 40 “in her sleep.” Her previous experiences, just days old at this point, were flowing into the present, informing and transforming not just her actions, but her underlying beliefs about them.

It was on this day that Liz and the other cyclists had a run-in with Mother Nature which threatened to derail their finish. “I’m feeling so successful because I’ve made it the six or seven days. I think I’m on top of the world, even though this has been so stupid, I’ve been so stupid. I’ve done it. But now I know I’m not going to be able to finish.” Another seasoned cyclist saw Liz, called her indoors to wait out the storm, and then rode with her to the finish.

*But the thing is that now I’m riding with seasoned cyclists. I can’t ride 15 to 20 miles an hour. I’m a 10-mile-an-hour girl, you know? But she will not let me go. It was so touching. She wants me to finish as bad as I want to finish. But I’m dying. I’m dying. Like you’ve never seen. And so in that experience, all I’m thinking about is pedaling up to ten: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. I made it to ten. Okay. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. And so the whole morning goes just like that, where I was literally counting by every 30 seconds of my life.*

Although exhausted, Liz found that, inexplicably, she wasn’t ready for the experience to end.

*The closer we got to Kansas, even though I’m that miserable, the more I want to pedal backwards. Something in me switched. And when I got to Kansas and they’ve got the congratulations banner where you hold your bike up, I am angry. I am mad. I was having this complete out of body experience with these emotions. And so I had to walk away from that, going, “Something in me really loved this.” I loved it a lot. And I’m going to do it again. I have to do it again. I just want to keep going across Kansas. I don’t care how tired I am. I gotta keep rolling. And so that changed my life. I can’t get enough of it now. I want more of it. There’s always, “What’s the next adventure? Where’s the next challenge?” The challenge becomes life-giving. It changes you somehow.*

**“Shut up. You’re lying to me. I can do this.”**

I asked Liz if she felt that she had learned things about herself that she might never have learned otherwise. She told me that she likes herself so much better now. She has become more comfortable being vulnerable and being exposed.

*You can't internalize intimidation. "I'm not enough." You just gotta be you. And the thing with long cycling trips is that you will alternate between being awesome and being awful. And so when you're being awesome, I want to be gracious to the next person. And I think I was really taught a lot by that first Freewill: the family atmosphere, the kindness, the way that people rooted for me when they didn't even know me. I want to root for others like that. And so that spills over. You don't just want to root for others in cycling. You want to root for them in everyday life. They've got negative chatter and you need to speak into their negative chatter and argue with them. And these are all things that you learn on a bike, but you also learn that that's what people need when they're grieving, when they are having a hard life, when they're having just a normal life.*

Liz also shared stories with me about participating some time later in Land Run, a grueling, 100-mile bicycle ride on steep gravel roads which were so muddy that she had to carry her bike for seven of those 100 miles. In training for Land Run, Liz learned how to have conversations with her body.

*Riding your bike, that century [100 miles] of Land Run, both through the training process and outside, you learn to listen to your body and when to ignore your body. You have to do both. You have to know when to tell your body, "Shut up. You're lying to me. I can do this." And then you also have to listen to your body and tell yourself, "No, you've got to pace yourself. You've got to pull back. You're pushing too hard."*

### ***Teaching for "One more minute" When her Physical/Emotional Reserves are Gone***

The week before Liz and I had our first conversation for this study, she had had a particularly challenging week. She had endured late-night hospital visits to support friends, the death of another close friend, and news that a family member had been diagnosed with cancer. When she entered her classroom to teach, she was emotionally and physically exhausted.

*I have no reserves. I have nothing left to give. I show up to the classroom on Monday, and the technology doesn't work. I did not have plan B or C in my head, but neither am I able to physically and emotionally have plan B or C. I literally start shaking in the classroom because I know I can't do it. But that's the thing with cycling. When you know you can't do it, you just keep pedaling. That's exactly what I did on Monday was teach for*

*the next minute, then teach for the next minute, teach for the next minute, teach for the next minute, teach for the next minute. And I got through the lesson. And so I guess right now I'm saying this to you to say, maybe cycling does affect me more than I think, because I remember coaching myself, one more minute, one more minute; laugh, be yourself. Do well. Do your best. But it was one at a time because the emotions would come back up again where I was just like, I can't do this. I can't. Just shut up. One more minute. Do your best, one more minute. Do your best, one more minute.*

For Liz, lessons she had learned while cycling transformed into the ability to coach herself through difficulties in teaching as well.

### ***Riding Loaded: "My Rolling Best"***

Liz and I talked at length about the times when she had bike packed, "riding loaded," solo. When a cyclist rides loaded, they carry their tent and all their camping gear, food, clothes, and all provisions on their bike. In addition to the physical challenges of carrying extra weight on the bike, bikepackers travel long distances, facing whatever the weather chooses to throw at them, and at times, share the road with fast-moving cars, trucks, and tractor-trailers.

*When you ride loaded, it's a completely different experience because you have to be independent, and that was where the call of the wild came from. Everything you need in life has to be on your bike. Now, if you put everything you need on your bike, that means it's so heavy that you're making it hard on yourself. So you have to make this decision of what you can take and what you can't take. There's this fine line between being prepared and being overly prepared. And I think that also flows into everyday life because in teaching or in life, my tendency is to be a perfectionist. You don't get to be perfect in nature because you can't have everything. And so you can only be as prepared as you can be, and you can't ever be prepared for everything. And so I think the same thing has come into my teaching. I'm always doing my best, but I realized that you can have your best with perfectionism or your rolling best.*

In that phrase, "your rolling best," Liz captured the spirit of doing her best, mile by mile, but allowing for graciousness toward herself when something does not go according to plan.

***"I realized what a gold and silver mine I have."***



When Liz and I talked about friendships, her face lit up. She told me a story about having recently vacationed with friends who didn't have a "goal to be outside." For Liz, it was not as rewarding to share experiences that did not involve being in nature in some manner.

*When I compare that to times with my friends that I'm doing outdoor adventures, oh my gosh. I realized what a gold and silver mine I have. And I'm just the luckiest girl in the whole wide world. I'm just overwhelmed, choked up because I'm so touched by it. So number one, I think I came to this realization last time we went camping. You need people to do the adventure with, and the scary stuff with, and laugh at yourself, and laugh at them. We look out for each other, and it's powerful to have these shared goals; the shared goals create more quality friendships.*

Playing devil's advocate, I pushed back a bit and asked if it wasn't possible to find shared meaning just as easily doing indoor pursuits. She didn't hesitate to answer, saying that many activities allow shared meaning with friends, being in nature and doing outdoor activities inserts an element of joint risk into the relationship. Doing "the scary stuff, the adventure stuff," inserts a catalyst that necessitates a particular type of interaction, candid and timely feedback, a continual give and take, relating moment by moment as terrains shift, weather changes, and so forth. "You need somebody who's going to be honest with you and is going to give you the feedback... that element is potentially more powerful when you're out in nature, because nature is wild, right? You never know what's going to throw at you." Liz stressed that she has other wonderful friendships, but they differ "because I think it's the adventure. I think it's the challenge. When they're successful, I'm successful because their goal became my goal. Nature's very conducive for that. You know, there's not a lot of that in life either."

### ***Being Alone in Nature***

**When one is alone at night in the depths of these woods, the stillness is at once awful and sublime. Every leaf seems to speak.**

**-John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals***

At some point, our conversations segued into considering the differences between being with others in nature and being alone in nature. Liz felt that these were two quite distinct pieces to her love of nature, leading her to share the following story.

*After my first few Freewheels, when you're with people, people, people, people, people, I was like, 'cut em loose, get rid of em.' I was crying in the inside of me for alone time on the bike. So I went and I bought everything to do bike touring. And I knew that the touring would be by myself. And so I took my bike, my Cannondale, up to Alaska.*

Liz's father lived approximately 45 miles outside of Anchorage at that time. On the day of Liz's departure for her solo ride, her dad drove to his job in Anchorage, and Liz made plans to meet him there the next day.

*And now I have to get to Anchorage with my bicycle. This is going to be my first tour by myself, and now I'm alone in a strange place. And it's just 45 miles. I mean, I can do 45 miles in a day. You know what I'm saying? It's crazy how easy this ride is, but you know, I freaked out! And so there's just these fears. So actually, in that moment, I texted Ginny, and I was just like, "I'm about to do it, and I'm not sure what to do, and I don't know if it's the right thing to do." And Ginny comes back with this, "Of course it's the right thing to do. Fear's normal. Go." And I was like, "I know. I know. I just need someone to tell me that."*

Liz rode 25 miles to a state park and put up her tent. She spent the evening by herself on the river, listening to the water going over the stones.

*I didn't think through things. Mentally there was just an emptiness, but in that emptiness, you're also still having to tell yourself, "I'm fine. No, no one's going to come up and get me, and if someone does, what am I going to do? I know my contingency plan. I'm going to hear them get through the zipper. I'm not going to be asleep when this happens." You know, you have to talk yourself through those fears. So, gender plays into fears, you know? I get to a campground and I'm trying to figure out where I'm going to camp. And I'm literally looking at each camp site trying to decide, "Is this safe for me?" When I was in New Mexico, it was such a family-friendly place. That's the safest I've ever felt camping. I mean, I actually wondered if I needed to get my bear spray out and lay it up by my head. And that's not really for bears; that's for bad people. It's just for the humans trying to get inside my tent. So I am willing to camp by myself, but I want to be in a campground where if I holler, someone hears me. I'm not willing yet to put my stuff in a pack on my back and hike by myself, you know what I'm saying? Nope. Not doing it because no one's there to hear me yell...You have got feelers and those feelers help you know if you're in danger, but sometimes they lie to you, and you've got to figure out when*

*they're telling the truth and when they're lying. I think that that's what camping by myself does sometimes. It gives me practice.*

Liz shared another story with me about adventuring outdoors alone, this time while cycling in Anchorage. She was on a path near the airport and well inside the city limits when she came upon a grizzly on the path. When I asked her if she was terrified, she said that she could tell by its body language that it was “totally happy.” Liz had come to Anchorage, however, to pick friends up at the airport, and the grizzly now stood on the path she needed to take to get there, with no way to detour safely around him.

*There's less populated places where you kind of have to be on guard, but not here. This is a highly populated path that I've done a zillion times. Are you kidding me? So it wasn't so much that even in that moment that I was scared as much as I knew I wasn't in control. I didn't know how to manage it. And I knew my parents would be so mad if I didn't do it right. But what do you do? What's right?*

Liz was eventually able to give a wide berth to the bear and pass by successfully. I asked her if she had had the courage to ride that path again after that incident. “Sure, yeah,” she replied.

After hearing her stories about cycling and camping alone, I asked Liz if friends or family members had cautioned her against going outside because of the concomitant dangers.

*I was really surprised with how much pushback I received this time from family about camping by myself. “What do you mean? How did you feel safe? What'd you do? I can't believe you did that.” There was a lot of that. I mean, this is not my first time to do this. Like this should feel like old hat, but I got pushback.*

***“I'm here to bike, not here to get picked up, you know?”***

During our conversation about venturing outdoors as women, Liz told me about other ways which gender affected what was happening to/around her.

*I wouldn't be cycling today if the local bike shop hadn't come in and [the female bike shop owner] hadn't started a women's only cycling group. I do not like being in a crowd of 10 men. It's not all cyclists, but at least in my world, what was happening with the cycling men is that they're so competitive, and they're so, I'm going to insult you and then flatter, insult, flatter, insult, flatter. And I'm like, I don't play that game. I don't insult my friends and I don't flatter my friends, you know, but that's what the men were doing. And*

*so it took being with women. I think I got lucky with the women that were coming to the Blue Skies rides because they were independent. They asked for help, sought help, gave help. There's not this complete atmosphere of condescension and flattery. But I see that gender, that's the biggest difference for me. I also found when I was going to [co-ed] rides, I had to keep my beacon on for, yeah, I'm a single woman, but I ain't looking to date. So leave me alone. These men would come up beside me to start to ride, and I'm just like, 'Oh my gosh, I swear. I'm here to bike, not here to get picked up, you know?'*

***“I think the land speaks to anyone who will listen.”***

In one of our conversations, Liz reminisced about meaningful times she had spent alone in nature.

*I spent some time in New Mexico alone, and so when I was in New Mexico and I'm in my hammock in these huge pines, right? I'm looking at these huge pines, blue skies, green. I had a book and I did get a couple chapters of the book read, but most of that time was just nothing, you know, just getting to a place of nothing and letting the colors minister to me and listening, because you can be in nature a really long time and never have listened, not even see the colors, not see the texture of the trees, not see what the atmosphere of the air around you feels like, just letting in that particular blue and that particular green of the New Mexico forest that I was in. I can step back there right now, and I can breathe it in and let that amazing beauty resonate. It somehow centers me again, and I'm not there.*

When she did stop to participate with nature and observe her textures, colors, fragrances, and warm and cool sensations, Liz said she experienced a “centering.” Something about opening her senses to the multi-sensorial experiences nature was offering her brought her calm.

Remembering the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations in retrospect, the memory had the ability to re-center her anew. It occurred to me that being alone *in* nature may not have been the best description of that phenomenon, but rather, being alone *with* nature in a mutually-engulfing relationship in which nature ministers to her while she gives herself over fully to nature. Liz transitioned seamlessly into another narrative which underscored this thought.

*So ask me why I was super excited to go to El Paso alone this summer, and it's because I wanted to go hear what El Paso had to say, and you can't hear what it has to say if someone's with you. What does the land say? I think the land speaks. I think sometimes we just think Indians listen to the land speak, but I think the land speaks to anyone who will listen. And I think that that's a different kind of vacation than going out just to hike.*

*Like there's times just to go on hike and say, here's a challenge. I hiked the tallest place in Texas, you know, or I hiked this just for the challenge of it. That's a different hike than I went to go listen, you know. I went to go see and be present.*

### **“Bringing a Campfire Conversation to an Academic Setting”**

As our conversations for this study drew to a close, and I thanked Liz for her willingness to share her stories with me, she left me with one last, beautifully-rich benediction:

*Let's be honest. We talk about all these things around the campfire. My hope was that something would resonate with you, the words and stories. And I think that's what would have happened if we had done it around the campfire. So I think that you are just bringing a campfire conversation to an academic setting and bringing knowledge out of it for others to benefit from. So I hope that there are themes that resonate with you, and then they resonate with the world, and that's really, really quite lovely.*

### **Susan's Stories**

I was excited that Susan had agreed to participate as a narrator in this study because she brought a different teaching perspective to the study: that of a homeschool parent. Susan has a PhD in the sciences, and has presently chosen to direct her learning and experiences toward her daughters' education. She approaches her role as an educator like she does her work in political advocacy: with passion, dedication, and energy.

### **Familial Inheritances**

Susan and I began by sharing stories of the times she spent outdoors as a child.

*It was the seventies, and we didn't watch a lot of TV, but you could always find kids outside. There was a cornfield in our backyard, and so we built forts out there, and we rode our bikes all over. I just remember being outside as a kid, pretty different than today's kids, kind of sadly.*

When I asked her to share more of her outdoor memories from childhood, like several of the other narrators, Susan thought back to her grandparents. Her grandfather was a professor of geology, and he and his wife lived on an acreage in a rural part of their state.

*The thing that sticks out is going to visit my grandparents. They would only let us watch Lawrence Welk and one other show, which we had no interest in as a kid, you know? So*

*it's virtually like TV didn't matter there. My grandparents had about 20 acres, and it was an old rock quarry, so one of the ponds had kind of a cliff. My sisters and I would head out in the morning, and we knew where all the paths were. My grandma would ring the bell when it was time for lunch, so we'd know to come back. But that piece of property, probably more than any other place, it just felt I had a really strong connection there because we spent so much time, and we knew all the land. I have this map in my head of places, and it's just chock full of memories of different things through the years.*

### ***Places of Memory: The Initial Tree***

Susan's grandfather carved each of the grandkids' initials into the "initial tree," a designated tree on their land out by the picnic table. When it was Susan's turn to have her initials carved into the tree, her grandfather asked her how she wanted her initials to appear. Instead of opting for the traditional spelling of her middle name, Susan opted for an alternate spelling of her middle name so that it would more closely resemble the spelling of a relative she was close to.

*Apparently, I was just stubborn enough that he carved my initials the way I asked. I was seven, based on the year that was carved there. And I always loved going and looking at that initial tree, you know, and just seeing how the scar heals on the tree, you know? It was our whole family, all my cousins were listed on there, and there's probably about 20 of us. When my grandparents were moving, they cut out that section of the tree and they had it in their house. While they were still alive, I got my nerve up and I asked them for it, and they gave it to me, so I'd have it.*

### ***Places of Memory: The Diving Rock***

Susan told me about the changes in her relationship with her grandparents and with their land as she grew older.

*Interestingly, when I went to college, I lived with my grandparents. So I got to experience that land as an adult, knowing there was this rock that we always called the diving rock. And in my mind, it was this, you know, pretty sizable rock. Like I swear five of us were on that rock at one time. And let me see, this rock, it's like three feet in diameter. Just like, wait, that's the diving rock? In my memory, it loomed large.*

Susan's grandparents eventually moved away from that home to a retirement home in another city. They sold their acreage and home to another geology professor, who let Susan and her grandparents return to the property from time to time.

*We would often call and ask if we can just traipse around and go on these trails that we enjoyed. So we'd get my grandparents in the car, and it was one of the last times that they were able to walk out, cause it was a little bit of a hike to the picnic table, right by the initial tree. I was with some of my nieces and nephews, and we got a picture at the picnic table, right by where the initial tree was. I adore both of them, and they're just these larger than life people. Because I lived with them when I went to college, our relationship transitioned from grandchild/ grandparents into more adults, and I got to know them in a different way than I did when I was a kid. I love that.*

**“How do you spell ‘sore’?”**

As our conversation shifted away from her childhood years, I asked Susan if she continued to enjoy being outside as she grew older. She told me more about her experiences outdoors as a college student.

*I did have a car for some of my college, but mostly I rode my bike. Even when I went to grad school, I didn't have a car. I'd load up my laundry in a duffel bag and ride my bike to the laundromat. That was my source of transportation for a big part of my life, even when I had a car sometimes.*

Susan shared a story about an experience she had in college when she met some riders who were participating in RAGBRAI, short for “The Register’s Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa.”

*When I was in college, I worked at a bookstore. One summer when I was working, RAGBRAI came through, and I just was blown away seeing all those cyclists, and talking to people that came in. There were some people from Germany who were buying postcards, and they said, “How do you spell sore?” And all the costumes, it just was this 10,000-person party on bikes. I liked the idea of RAGBRAI. I got introduced to it, and then, you know, life goes on.*

Later after Susan and her family had moved to Oklahoma, she and some friends from Iowa decided they wanted to participate in RAGBRAI themselves. “There was a group of about five or six of us who said, ‘Yeah, I want to do that.’ And then they all dropped off. It was just left with me.”

About a month prior, Susan had met Liz, and through conversation, each discovered that the other was planning to participate in RAGBRAI.

*So I just tagged on with her group. It was just kind of a goal that I wanted to do ever since I saw it in person in college. Plus that year the route went through Iowa city, so it was like the stars were lined up. I got to visit my old haunts. The route went right by two places I used to live in college. One of my mom's high school friends lived there, so I stayed at her house, and got a shower and house.*

Susan said that RAGBRAI was by far the most physically demanding activity she had ever participated in. When I asked her about her thoughts and feelings after participating, she shared two perspectives. “It certainly is a big sense of accomplishment. And as I get older, it's nice to remember that I did RAGBRAI,” she said, but also recognized that the magnitude of the commitment came at a cost:

*I didn't think, “I'm going to come back next year and do it,” because it took a lot of training, and I felt really selfish going on all those training rides. I feel like I did the bare minimum to not die. But I would say the thing that lasts longest in my memory is just the little conversations that you have with people, total strangers and also some of the people in our core group.*

### **Teaching**

When I asked Susan if her experiences in nature entered into her teaching, she told me about how she includes elements of nature into her lessons in ways that take each of her daughters' needs into consideration. She incorporates natural elements into art projects, spends time outdoors with them, and takes them on bicycle rides. The summer I wrote this dissertation, I spent some time with Susan and her family, and had the privilege of riding bicycles with them. I got to enjoy watching her daughters learn and grow as cyclists and outdoorswomen.

***“I love looking at the mountains. I never get tired of that.”***

As we talked, Susan compared the landscapes, climates, and sceneries where she has lived.

*I grew up in the flattest part of South Dakota, and so being outside, it wasn't the scenery per se, although there is a certain beauty of the prairie, but it's much more subtle than other parts. There was just the focus on the activity and just being outside, getting fresh air. But we lived in Arizona for about eight years and then Colorado for four, and there*



*the scenery is so much more prominent. You know, you might go on a hike to get to a certain view. Frankly, the whole hike is a fantastic view. I do miss that part of it, but mostly I just enjoy being outside. I just like having some fresh air.*

I asked Susan if she gravitated to a particular aspect of nature, and without hesitation, she said it was the mountains.

*I think it's mostly because where I grew up, it was so flat. When I moved to Iowa, I said to people, "It's so hilly here," and they just looked at me like I was crazy because there are barely any hills. So I just love looking at mountains. I never got tired of that. I never took it for granted when we lived in Colorado, just seeing that view of the mountains on the horizon.*

***"All the chaos of the world just kind of disappears for that hour."***

As an adult, Susan said that walking is her most frequent outdoor activity. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and stay-at-home orders were in place, she and her husband began to go for walks almost every day.

*Especially during COVID, walking has been a very grounding experience. All the chaos of the world just kind of disappears for that hour. And also it has been nice to have that time for me and my husband where there are no kids, and you can talk about parenting challenges or even just connect as two people again.*

## **Nicole's Stories**

### ***Familial Inheritances***

Nicole's memories of spending time outside also have their genesis at her grandparents' house, a log cabin on an 80-acre farm in central Texas. She and her family visited her grandparents on a monthly basis, and Nicole and her siblings played outdoors with her cousins. Nicole shared stories with me about those experiences.

*The house was a three-room house, so when the adults were in there, it was really too crowded for kids to be in there, too. So we spent all of our time outside. While all the adults were in the little log cabin, the cousins would just get into trouble. I mean, we would just get out and go. We could swim in the creek. We could catch minnows. My brother tried to jump a ravine on a bicycle. I got a concussion. There was an old station wagon with no doors, and we were allowed to drive through the pastures. There was a movie about Africa. It was called Hatari. So I distinctly remember that we even called it*

*“playing Hatari.” So we did get into a lot of trouble on those kinds of weekends, you know, jumping around in a hay barn, that kind of thing. I think that's probably my earliest memories of the outdoors.*

I asked Nicole if she looked forward to those weekends, and she called it “a part of life... It was a great way to spend a childhood.” Nicole grew up in Houston where summers were hot, so she, her parents, and her siblings traveled many summers to Colorado or the Continental Divide, the Grand Canyon, or White Sands, New Mexico.

*Being in Houston, there wasn't a lot of nature. You could go to some parks, but they were crowded. One real vivid memory I have is being in Colorado among the pine trees and making breakfast on a Coleman stove. I can almost conjure up that whole feeling of the coolness on my skin. The smells of those pine trees and of the cooking breakfast outside, are real pleasant memories for me.*

Nicole’s father also impacted her views of being outside. He was a soldier in World War II and was captured in the Philippines, where he spent three years in a prison camp. Afterward, he was shipped to Japan on a “hell ship,” an unmarked boat which was therefore subject to being bombed by Americans. He was forced to stand up in the crowded bottom of the ship for 45 days. Nicole recalled that, when he was freed and returned to the U.S., he had a deep affinity for being outside.

*I know he had PTSD because he talked about his stories of the war over and over and over again. But he was the happiest person I've ever met. But he always wanted to be outside. I think the outside was a comfort to him. And that's how he got through PTSD. I mean, he lived a full life. He died a week shy of 98 years old and was happy. He would tell me regularly, he said, “I'm just happy I woke up today. You know, I get another day.” And I thought, “What a great way to look at life. I get another day.” And I think the fact that we were outside so much was his treatment for it.*

At that point, I was compelled to tell Nicole that I saw that same spirit of happiness and joy in her. This was her reply:

*I hope so. I hope I can always be that way because to me, it made such a difference in his life. Just watching the way he lived his life and passed away at the end. So I try to push myself in his direction. And I do think that my motivation is to be more like him.*

***“I hit the jackpot with that group.”***

The draw of outside stayed with Nicole as she entered college. She and her friends frequently rode their bikes to Austin and spent time at the lakes and city parks, places she found to be calming. Later, after she had married and had two daughters, she found an avenue to outside by serving as a Girl Scout leader for her daughters' troops. Her experiences with her younger daughter's troop were particularly memorable.

*They were high adventure kind of girls. So every year we sat down after we got our cookie money together, and I'd say, "Here's your pot of money. What do you want to do?" And those girls took me on the most fantastic ride of my life.*

Before this time, Nicole described herself as a timid person. Her experiences with this troop brought her to an experience which changed her perspective.

*We were at a camp with their school, and they were all sitting around a campfire, and the cabins were pretty far away through the dark woods. And one girl needed to go back to the cabin. And somehow, I got tasked with taking her back to the cabin. And I thought, "Oh, I'm a little bit scared. I don't know that I can do this." And it was like an epiphany. "Yes, I can." I remember that moment where I had to decide that I'm the one in charge, and I can't be scared anymore. And it was like, that whole thing just lifted off of me. It was definitely an epiphany that really there isn't anything to be scared of, that bad things out in the wilderness are rare. And if I give up that fear, I can experience so much and be comfortable with experiencing that. So that's what my girls taught me.*

Her words surprised me, because more than once, I had heard Nicole describe herself as an "adrenaline junkie." When I reminded her of this and asked her to explain, she reflected on her childhood.

*Right. But that was not me. That was not me growing up because my mom was really, really fearful of everything. And she is still. I didn't even learn how to swim until I was pregnant. And I don't even really swim well, I just can, you know, dog paddle. But it was always, "Don't go near the water. It's a scary thing. Don't go near the water." When we were in Colorado, "Don't go near the edge of any overlook. You would fall. It's dangerous," you know? And so I grew up with a lot of, "Things out there are scary; things out there are dangerous."*

Nicole's epiphany set her life on a new course. She and the girls in her troop traversed the Virginia Creeper trail on bicycles. They canoed on class three rivers (a classification which

indicates the presence of rapids with high, irregular waves) which Olympic teams had used as training rivers.

*We did camping. We did the Appalachian trail. We did rock climbing. You name it, those girls wanted to do it. And they were never afraid of anything. It was just amazing to me. I hit the jackpot with that group. Going on the Appalachian Trail, those girls never complained about why can't I take a shower tonight, you know? They just embraced it. No one ever complained that it's raining, and we're going to get all wet. They just did it. That was a phenomenal accomplishment to me.*

***“A little piece of happiness inserted in your brain.”***

In one of our conversations, Nicole and I talked about stories which had evolved in hindsight, events which, at the time we were undergoing them, seemed more difficult or dangerous than exciting and positive, per se. Nicole smiled as she thought back to moments she had seen this phenomenon in her own stories.

*There were times where, in the moment, you're hiking someplace, and it's pouring down rain, and you're soaking, and you're cold, and you're tired, and your feet hurt. In the moment, you're not too happy. Then when you finish it and complete it, you do have a happier kind of retelling of that story with a positive slant. And each time you do that, I think you get a little piece of happiness inserted in your brain that lets you know that's okay. Being miserable is okay. My husband Paul and I talk about this all the time. If it doesn't kill you, it's an adventure. And sometimes we come out of things and say, “Whoa, that was, that was pretty rough.” And Paul will say, “It didn't kill you.” And then there's that little spark. Oh, it didn't kill me. So it was an adventure. That's kind of a little theme that we go on all the time. If it doesn't kill you, it's an adventure.*

### ***Social Connections and the Outdoors***

I asked Nicole about her friendships with women who also enjoyed doing things outside.

*I feel like the Blue Skies group is my lifeline to get out in nature, even for hikes around town. I can't think of any of my other friends that do that, you know, would even think about taking a long hike, maybe walk around the neighborhood, but really not hikes.*

Nicole and I discussed two upcoming events we were both planning to do. One was a 338-mile bikepacking trip from Washington, D.C. to Pittsburgh, PA. The other was to climb a “fourteener,” a mountain whose peak reaches to or above 14,000 feet.

*You know, I'd like to say that I've learned to embrace challenges, but I still see, you know, this whole thing with riding the bike from DC to Pittsburgh. It's got me freaked out a little bit. So I think what I learned is, I've got a long way to go, and life is short. So if you're going to do it, do it. Don't put it off, just do it. So I feel like I'm still in progression.*

When I asked Nicole if she had participated in any solo hiking or camping, she hesitated.

*Even though the idea of soloing is very intriguing to me, I don't know that I ever will take that step. Actually people are more scary to me than being outside. I've read a lot of things that women have posted that they feel the same way. They do stealth camping because they're not scared of the animals that they may encounter. They're more scared of the people they may encounter being a solo woman. So there's always somebody I know that will go with me. And when we do, like with the Blue Skies group, there's so many of us that I feel safe. I think even if it was just one other woman with myself, I would probably not do that.*

This prompted me to inquire if she could tell me any stories about negative encounters she may have had which she felt were directly related to being a woman.

*I did have an encounter a few years ago. Paul and I were in Vedauwoo, Wyoming, and the campground was totally full. So we had to go to a national forest overflow, and it was basically empty. That night, I was sitting around the campfire, and Paul went into the camper early, and I was just sitting there around the campfire, enjoying it. And I stood up and turned around, and that guy [she had greeted earlier] was right behind me.*

Nicole told the man to leave, but the experience left her jittery, and resulted in a sleepless night for her.

*We were in a canvas pop-up, which to me is very vulnerable if somebody has bad intentions. So gender does play into it because of the vulnerability of being alone, not wanting to sleep because you need to be vigilant. But to think that the issue now is people, it's just very sad to me. That's why I think soloing would be really tough, or even going with just one other woman might be really tough.*

Nicole called elements of nature which held potential danger, such as wildlife, changing weather, and other pieces outside of her control “normal.” “But the human kind, that’s just not normal.”

**“All the teachers always said, ‘Oh, you've got windows!’”**

In some of our conversations for this study, Nicole and I discussed her career in education. She had recently retired from the professional sphere, but told me she always loved

working with her students. Her particular role in teaching involved working with a different student approximately every half hour. “It was that same stimulation that I get from outside. So every half hour, what I was doing changes.”

Nicole said that because of the rapidly-changing schedule, it was difficult for her to take students outdoors, but she was thankful to have a window in her room. “I was blessed to have a window in my room for 13 of the 15 years I was at my school, but windows were few and far between in that school. All the teachers always said, ‘Oh, you've got windows!’ Even though they leaked, I did have windows.”

She shared one story with me in which she attempted unsuccessfully to incorporate nature into her teaching.

*We had an outdoor day, so that's when I can actually make the connections with the kids. They had me take a bunch of digital cameras out to the outdoor classroom, and my group was supposed to take pictures and talk about how to photograph nature. So I had them take their own picture, and then at the end of the day, when I took all my cameras in, I said, “What do you want me to do with what we collected?” And she said, “We're just going to dump them and erase them.” And I thought, “How are you ever going to give the kids feedback?” I thought we would pull up one picture from each kid and talk about how really phenomenal they were taking pictures of nature. But obviously there was no time for any feedback. That's about the closest to nature that I got at that school. And it was a fail.*

***“That’s a refuge for me.”***

Nicole talked about her desire to make her home a place where she can enjoy nature from both the inside and outside.

*I was just in the hammock. I think the sunshine improves your mental health so much that, you know, that's what I do, even when it is hot. So I stay outside as much as possible... I prefer being outside more than anything, even now. If the weather's semi nice and it's not raining on me, I'm usually outside, and I make little, little spaces outside for myself. I have a couple of swings, little places where you can sit. My husband keeps the inside temperature really cold, and so that's a refuge for me to go outside and just have a more palatable temperature. So I'm outside a lot.*

I asked Nicole to explain what it was that she loved about being in those spaces:

*It allows me to just think without being worried about things. I can sit on my swing for an hour and stare at the same scenery and never get bored. I can watch the birds, or I can watch the way the little leaves on the trees move. We have a couple of Cottonwood trees in the backyard, and the leaf movement is a lot like aspens. Just watching that movement of the leaves brings me a lot of enjoyment.*

Nicole explained that she had spent some time reading about mindfulness. She practices mindfulness outdoors by intentionally separating her perceptions of sights, sounds, and smells.

*Instead of hearing the outside sounds as a unit, I've started picking them apart and saying, okay, now I don't just hear birds. I hear individual birds. And this one sounds different from this one, which sounds different from this one. That's really gratifying to me. I feel like I've heightened my senses by that one little change in how I listen...I have a need to go out and make those observations, you know? It stimulates my mind to think about things and make connections.*

### **“Need to Go Outside and See the Leaves Blowing”**

Like other narrators in this study, Nicole described her pull to go outdoors as a need.

*I feel it on a daily basis. I need to go outside. Inside, there's no movement. There's no change, or the change is so gradual. That's my need, to go outside and see the leaves blowing and see how the grass changed from yesterday to today, or to, “It rained last night, look at the changes.” Not to be morbid or anything, but because we have that sun porch, I tell Paul that if I ever got to the point where I was incapacitated, that he needs to just move my bed out to the sun porch. It has windows on three sides. And so even if I was incapacitated, I could still be outside. You know, one of the things that sticks with me is someone once said at the end of your life, you don't want to say, “I wish I had...” fill in the blank. And I've kinda taken that to heart. If I were to have some catastrophic thing happen to me, and I couldn't do the things that I'm used to doing, could I say to myself, “I had a good life”? And I think that's what I really feel at this point, because of all the things that I've done. I think I could say, “Yes, I've had a good life,” but that doesn't mean I want to stop, just keep going. Cause I don't want to ever say to myself, “Oh, I wish I had....” And this bike trip is one of those things; a multi-day adventure on a bicycle. I don't want to say, “I wish I had done that” and then not.*

### **The Gift of Nature: “Everything is provided for you here.”**

Nicole went on to explain that she feels nature has made her not only a happier person, but also a more grateful one. Ponderings such as this soon led us into spiritual considerations, and she shared this belief with me:

*We've been given this gift of nature. Even some of the verses of the Bible, the whole thought of being like the birds and not toiling because everything's provided for you. That's my connection to nature: look, everything is provided for you here. The water, the food, the beauty, the serenity, all of that's just right here for the taking. And so many people just don't even go out. I mean, there are friends of mine that just really don't go outside, unless it's a perfect day, which that doesn't come that often, but, you know, so what if you sweat, if you get bites, it's just part of enjoying it. You know, earlier in my life, most of prayers centered around asking for something in prayer. And now at this stage in my life, it's more prayers of thanksgiving, you know? It's, it's just kind of been a complete shift in how I pray.*

## **Steph's Stories**

Steph's memories of outdoors reach back to her grandparents' summer house on the river where she spent many summer days as a child. She remembers both grandparents spending a lot of time working in their yard and her grandfather fishing on the river.

*We would go down every weekend to their house, and we would be outside all the time. So we were outside on the water. We could swim. We could stand up in the water. It wasn't a fast-flowing river, so it was safe for us to be there. And then as we got to be closer to teenagers, we could take the rowboat and go across the river on it. We weren't allowed to use the motor.*

She told me a story about one winter when the temperature dropped so low that the river froze.

*I mean, people were driving cars on it. So we took our ice skates down to the river, and my whole family got out there, and we skated. Just the freedom to be able to skate on the ice under the bridge into the middle of the river and be out there, it was pretty cool.*

Between her parents, Steph remembered that her mother was the more "outdoor adventure person," who took Steph and her sisters floating down the stream near their house.

*We had a wooded lot that my parents bought when I was a teenager, and they built a house. There was a stream at the bottom of the hill, and we would go float the stream, you know, see where it went. I think probably my dad would come pick us up wherever we got out.*

Steph's father was less of an outdoors person than her mother, but because he was an athlete, he participated in activities like sledding, ice skating, and snowball fights outdoors with the family. Neither Steph's parents nor grandparents camped or rode bicycles, but she began to learn these



as a young adult. In her stories, she recalled the lessons and missteps of being an inexperienced camper.

*I never went camping with my family. That's not something that we did, but in my early twenties, one of my husband's friends had been a Boy Scout. So he took us on some camping trips and to the mountains in Colorado and Wyoming. We went hiking in the winter one year, and it was the first time I'd been camping. And it's like January, very cold. We rented sleeping bags because we didn't have any of that stuff. And it turned out that the sleeping bag that I rented was a child's sleeping bag, so it wasn't long enough, and I could not get comfortable. We were going to go adventuring into the woods, so we went into town and got some proper sleeping bags.*

### ***“The Borders of Our Ability”***

As she spent more and more time in nature, Steph learned to find and be at peace with her limits.

*We did some outdoor cross-country skiing, which I found extremely hard. So I didn't really like it because it was too hard for me. I just wasn't physically ready for that. You know, we were not seasoned hikers or campers and jumped in the deep end. I remember on one hand feeling really excited that we got to do that, and I feel like I have good memories about it, but I remember feeling kind of frustrated too, because we jumped into such strenuous activities. So we were definitely challenging the borders of our ability.*

To underscore her point, Steph shared another story.

*We were out in the middle of nowhere, and there was a high mountain, Gannett Peak. My friend and a couple of his buddies wanted to climb it, and it was snow covered. My husband and I did not go. We said, “We'll stay at the base camp and cook dinner when you come back.” And so we watched them become tiny specks on the snow up there, and we were glad that wasn't us, because we knew that it was going to be too much for us. I also remember when we were coming out of the mountains in Wyoming, we walked really fast because we knew we were coming back to civilization. Our spirits were much more animated coming back in because we knew, okay, we're coming back to civilization. We know we're coming back to the familiar. And I remember that feeling of relief. I have good memories of it. It wasn't something I'm sorry I did.*

### ***Nature on Her Terms***

Steph and her husband still enjoy camping, cycling, and being outdoors, but she has learned to do it on her own terms.

*We brought it back down to a level where we can just enjoy ourselves. We used to tent camp all the time, and now we have a pull-behind trailer that we take with our truck. We take all our stuff, and we park it in one place, and we stay there and adventure out from the campsite. We just take whatever time we need. You know, possibly get hurt? We don't want to do that.*

She said that spending time outside has taught her about herself.

*It helps me to know and to respect my limits and to understand that, you know, maybe it's okay to not want to do everything that I could do. Because I want to feel happy when I'm outside.*

Within those boundaries, nature is inviting to her. Steph especially enjoys cycling when she can ride within the limits she sets for herself. She and her husband and son have participated in Freewheel, and have a system in which they take turns driving a vehicle along the route so that they each get a day off from riding every third day.

*I think that's probably what I've come to understand about myself is that I'm out there to have fun, and I'm not out there to prove anything. I'll be happy if I can do it, but I don't mind saying, "Okay, I think I'm really done."*

The biggest prize for being in nature for Steph is a "sense of freedom," which she defines in a particular way:

*That sense of freedom and just being able to go places that you can't [otherwise] go. We had the equipment to do it. So that was something that was important to be able to say. We had the right clothes to keep us warm, so we weren't exposed to the cold.*

For Steph, freedom and joy came from experiencing nature inside of her own boundaries.

***"The kids know that I'm the person that rides her bike to school."***

When the weather allows, Steph commutes on her bicycle to the school where she teaches. Her biking has stirred interest among other teachers who have chosen to commute by bike as well. As she told me commuting stories, Steph shared about the challenges of the pandemic, the mental toll it sometimes took, and the effect it had on cycling for her.

*This year [I commute by bike] less often actually than in previous years. It's been a really hard year, and I haven't had enough mental energy to be safe on my bike. But I have tried to ride some. I rode today because I was just determined to get back on my*

*bike, but yeah, the kids know that I'm the person that rides. I ride my electric bike, so that's helping. That helps me a lot to be able to feel like I can do it when I do it.*

### **What Comes into the Classroom**

When Steph and I talked about ways in which our outdoor adventures may have affected what our paradigms in the classroom, she told me about an epiphany she had when she was on a cycling tour with her husband in Spain which has given her a unique perspective on teaching.

*When I was riding on the bike tour, I thought that all of the activities I have done in life--bikes... horseback riding, riding on some gravel, hiking in the mountains, bike riding in groups with friends---all of those things prepared me for doing that activity. It felt like a culmination of something I had unknowingly prepared for all of my life. In that way, relating to school, we don't always know what future we are preparing for when we study things or participate in activities. Just try to get good at what you are learning and doing. We need to do things for the sake of knowing them, experiencing them, because in the future, you may be called on to use that. And knowing that you can do challenging things is a help to get through both fun and difficult times.*

### **Cathy's Stories**

I did not know Cathy very well before she joined me for this study. We had many mutual friends and had attended some of the same social functions, but I had never had the chance to sit down and talk with her one on one. Nevertheless, among the narrators, Cathy's stories have made perhaps some of the greatest lasting impact upon my own thinking and understanding of varied ways to be in and with nature. Cathy is well-read, intelligent, witty, and articulate; an educator who works during summer breaks and weekends to ensure her students have engaging, interactive, and quality class time. She is also a talented photographer with an ability to capture intriguing pieces of the outdoors through her lens. Cathy is intentional about seeking simplicity and minimalism in life, which comes through in her lighthearted, carefree spirit.

***“The idea of nature was like, don't go there, because they wanted us safe.”***

Cathy told me that when she was growing up, she was very sheltered by her parents.

*We weren't allowed to go anywhere or do anything on our own, and so the idea of nature was like, don't go there, because they wanted us safe. We just didn't grow up doing that kind of thing.*

Cathy did tell me about one season of her childhood when she spent more time than usual outdoors.

*When we were kids, my family lived in Wisconsin for a while. It was a college town, of course, because both my parents are with the universities. We were like a mile from our elementary school, and it was such a small town, my parents deviated from their usual, "You guys have to be with us all the time." They let us walk to school. We'd even walk home for lunch. We thought nothing of, "Let's walk downtown to the library." Let's go, you know. Down at the bottom of this hill, somebody had dumped a load of bricks. And so all the kids, for the three some-odd years we lived there, we built houses with bricks down there. We were just outside all the time. That was like the most outdoors time of my life, because we had such a small place there. It was the only time in my life my parents weren't concerned with getting more and bigger houses and bigger cars. We just got to experience all these things, you know, just jump in the car and let's go to a state park for the weekend. It's funny, because I hadn't really thought about it, but that was such a great time in my life to be outdoors in a safe way. We had all these outdoor experiences.*

As Cathy shared stories about these outdoor experiences, she spoke about her father.

*Now, my dad gardened, so I did, too. I mean, I just started doing it, and I loved it. Maybe I like a more controlled nature. I don't even know if you can call that nature, but I've been a gardener for a long time.*

I assured Cathy that her experiences as a gardener were valuable to the study, and I asked her to share more about her beginnings as a gardener. She told me that her father had a high-profile job, and he gardened to relieve stress. For him, therefore, the activity was a solitary one.

*He didn't want anybody doing that with him. All he would let us do was weed, and not even that very much. So I think to me it was really fun when I had my first house, and I could just do what I wanted to do. I loved being experimental and trying things and just seeing what happens. But he didn't encourage that kind of participation. That was his alone time.*

***"It was nature, but it was kind of controlled nature."***

When Cathy got married and she and her husband bought their own home on a large lot, she got her chance to do her own gardening.

*It's interesting, when I first started gardening, I had gone through this space in my life where I was a young mother, and I had a child, and I didn't have any friends. We moved to a house that was on a big double lot and had a swimming pool, and I was lucky enough to get to be a stay-at-home mom. My husband was working all the time because he was a partner in a law firm, and we lived in this ritzy neighborhood, but people weren't very friendly. Finally I just gave up and thought, "Well, I'm going to garden." And the funny thing is, it was such a solitary activity, but that's how I got friends. This was before the internet. Who's going to really know about how to garden in Oklahoma? And back then, there were still garden clubs. You'd go and listen to these women who've been gardening in this climate for like 60 years, and they were hilarious. They were so great. So I just gardened all the time, and when I was hot or sweaty, I would just jump in the pool. Yeah. It was nature, but it was kind of controlled nature.*

I asked Cathy if she ever gardened to relieve stress like she had seen her father do.

*I was always thinking about gardening instead of something stressful. I think you're just thinking about, "Well, what am I going to put in that corner over there?" You know, I'm thinking about all the possibilities. "Oh, I can go to the nursery center over there. I haven't been there in a while." It just keeps you from getting stressed because you're thinking of other stuff.*

As she shared her stories with me, she helped me to understand why gardening was so meaningful to her.

*You get filthy dirty. I used to work at a plant nursery when I lived in another city, long before I started teaching. And you get filthy all the time. That's when I started the habit, I would come home and take a shower. That's how you can tell you're doing labor because you can't go to sleep like that, you know? It's just such a great feeling. It is very freeing.*

As she pondered this aloud, Cathy started piecing together meaning from her stories as she shared them, and disparate threads began to intertwine.

*Before I talked to you, I wouldn't have said I was an outdoors person, but I realize that I do tend to do those simple things, the walking and the gardening and the sitting out and looking at the sunset. I notice that now that we're talking about it, I love swimming pools. I love gardens. I love yoga and all those things are kind of out in nature, but kind of in a more controlled way. Does that make sense?*

### ***Being in Nature Versus Doing in Nature***

Cathy's stories had helped to flush out two fundamentally distinct modes of being with/in nature that I will address more fully in Chapter V. We began to discuss the differences between being in nature versus doing in nature more purposefully.

*I like to go to the Botanic Garden and just kind of walk around. I thought all those things you guys did, I thought you guys didn't think of nature until you were in the middle of doing this crazy thing and rappelling down a mountain or kayaking down a fast-moving stream. But to me, it's so close at hand. I mean, I could go over there right now, I'm sure there's some weeds over there, or I could go to a nursery, and I could be surrounded by plants.*

I found myself enamored with the simplicity and immediacy of the connections she made with nature. Like a close friend, it was always easy for her to reach out in such ways. Among her close-at-hand connections to nature, Cathy enjoys walking outdoors. Interestingly, it is a love she first encountered in books as a child.

*I get this from British novels, but I love to walk all the time. When I was a kid, I read a lot of Victorian novels where people would just kind of take off on a walk and come back several hours later. And I still love doing that.*

Cathy walks long distances outdoors and has trained for walking events of five and ten kilometers, as well as a half-marathon. To train, she often walks the paved path around a lake at the local park. When she walks, she values taking the time to stop and take pictures.

*One time I was walking around the lake, and I took this picture, and I said something like, "My time is really off because I stopped to take pictures." A friend said, "Well, you've got to stop taking pictures." And I thought, "But that's why I do this." I tend to take a lot of nature photos, I think, because that's very appealing to me. Most of my photos, there's nobody in them. I never shoot people. That's a very nature-oriented thing for me, and I really like that. I like seeing something that is maybe ordinary, but it's extraordinary because you captured it.*

**Figure 17** “Unfolding - a sunflower on Riverside in Tulsa inviting us to admire - and unfold ourselves...” (Cathy, 2021).



**Figure 18** “After class in my happy place.” OSU Botanic Garden (Cathy, 2014).



Cathy also enjoys doing yoga outdoors. For her, it is not only a way of communing with nature, but also a means of socializing with others. During the COVID-19 pandemic, those who had led or participated in indoor yoga had to think creatively. They moved to outdoor spaces; they created “pop-up” yoga sessions in outdoor locations where participants could socially distance themselves.

*[Pop-up yoga] is kind of a random thing, and it's happened more since COVID. People are trying to get outside. There is a rooftop on Cherry Street in Tulsa where they had the farmer's market. They would have yoga on the rooftop early in the morning. It's funny, all these activities that I started doing were supposed to be very solitary; yoga you would think, too. But I have friends because I was into that. Now I have two teachers at school who I talked into doing it with me a couple of times a week.*

### ***The Treehouse***

Cathy now chooses to live a minimalist lifestyle. Her home is the envy of many of her friends, but not because it is large or lavish. Instead, it is beautiful in its openness and simplicity.

It has an expansive balcony which beckons all who enter her place to step out and enjoy the fresh air.

*I like my place because it has so many windows. I feel like I'm in a tree house. I tend to be kind of claustrophobic, and that's one reason I'm a minimalist. I don't like to feel hemmed in. And I think I like these contained spaces that are outside, like in a garden, because you're out there, but you're safe, and you're not penned in. And I think about moving sometimes, but gosh, you know, living in a tree house is so fun. You know, like remembering the Swiss Family Robinson. It's the coolest thing.*

This led us into stories about teaching, as Cathy began to tell me about her classroom.

*Right now, my classroom has windows. I'm very lucky. I have a great view. I'm up on a cul-de-sac, so I get to see the ponds and the trees. And when I'm in the front of the classroom, I get to look out through this wide swath of windows that cover the whole back end of the classroom. And it's funny, but my teachers on either side of me always keep their blinds closed, which I don't really understand. Why would you do that? I love seeing the different weather come in. Just that looking out of all the windows and that long view. I think to just take that long view, that long stare, that sitting on the porch with a drink kind of thing.*

As our conversations drew to a close, Cathy and I felt we had gained more nuanced insight into both ourselves and the meanings we had made with/in nature. Her summation was poignant and beautiful.

*I think my attitude towards being outside is, in a way, very childish. It's like a little kid, "Let's go out and play," you know? I think in terms like now I get to live in a tree house. This is really cool. I think as I get older, I feel like I'm trying to get more childlike all the time, in a good way. And that's fine. That's the right direction.*

After we spoke, I thought through my own experiences in nature, and what they mean to me. There have been many occasions when I was outdoors that I focused primarily on a particular goal, such as running a certain number of miles or going a particular speed on a bike. On those occasions, I did not pay as much attention to what surrounded me. Did I lose the experience with nature because it wasn't my primary focus? Communing with/in nature had been an end in itself for Cathy. Had I at times used nature as merely a means to an end? Did I need to rethink, reevaluate, and remember? I realized that, although I had often set specific



events and accomplishments in front of me, upon remembrance, it seemed that I placed more value on the moments that I could simply sit, witness some element of nature, and be still. In those moments of stillness, I had perhaps greater capacity to internalize and connect to the earth. I knew my conversations with Cathy would push me back into Dewey to ponder these questions more deeply.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCOVERIES**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter IV, I organized the narrators' stories around particular subtle themes emerging from in vivo language to allow them to flow freely without the encumbrance of being tied to larger connections or overarching threads. In this chapter, however, I foreground and examine themes which emerged across narrator stories of their experiences, and individual accounts work more as exemplars of larger considerations and connections. This chapter also considers how these themes work to illuminate the inquiry questions which launched this study. To assist with the flow and clarity of this chapter, I have numbered the themes. I have organized each inquiry question as section heading, and the themes which inform each fall under those as subheadings. Specifically, the headings and subheadings follow this order:

**How have familial inheritances (Goodall, 2005) shaped their narratives about nature?**

Theme 1: Threads of temporality: stories which reach backward to inform the present, future

**How do relationships with others in outdoor experiences shape women-teachers' narratives?**

Theme 2: Going outside to be together

Theme 3: Going outside to be alone

**What are the implications when educators who value communing with/in nature enter classrooms, interact with colleagues, and model their paradigms?**

Theme 4: Philosophies of teaching touched by nature

**How do women-teachers experience nature?**

Theme 5: Doing and undergoing: two ways of being with/in nature

Theme 6: Becoming or discovering who they are

Theme 7: Sehnsucht – experiences lead to a never-ending journey to outside

In this chapter, I also consider more deeply consider Dewey's theoretical framework in relation to the study, the concepts of doing/undergoing and continuity of experience, and the manner in which these manifested in the narrators' stories. Metaphorically, Chapters V and VI will act as steps down into deeper pools of theoretical thought. Chapter V focuses primarily on themes which emerged across narrators and gives preliminary illumination to Dewey; Chapter 6 uses those themes as stepping stones to wade deeper into Dewey and to consider the larger, societal implications of the "questions worth asking" which subsequently arise.

**How have Familial Inheritances Shaped Teacher Narratives about Nature?**

**Theme 1: Threads of Temporality: Stories which Reach Backward to Inform the Present, Future**

**Not long ago, with deep emotion, I visited the home where I was born. I stepped onto the same ground on which I first stood up, on which I first walked, began to talk, and learned to read. It was that same world that first presented itself to my understanding through my reading it. There I saw again some of the trees of my childhood. I recognized them without difficulty. I almost embraced their thick trunks, young trunks in my childhood. Then, what I like to call a gentle or well-behaved nostalgia, emanating from the earth, the trees, the house, carefully enveloped me. I left the house content, feeling the joy of someone who has reencountered loved ones.**

**-Paulo Freire, *Reading the Word and the World***

Goodall (2005) wrote, “What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs” (p. 98). The narrators wove stories that worked pieces of their past into their present again and again, creating rich temporal tapestries and illuminating the ongoing influence that moments from their childhoods still play as they forge decisions about going outside. All of the narrators had a familial inheritance which positively influenced their earliest memories of outside, and each shared stories of relatives who opened a door to nature. Accounts reflected women’s desire to continue that particular family inheritance. One narrator continued her aunt’s story of cycling and embraced the beauty she saw in a photograph. “She looked so vibrant and so beautiful and so healthy, and so all the way through my childhood, I kept thinking, ‘When I grow up, that’s who I want to be. That’s the beauty I want,’” (Liz). This inheritance shaped my meeting with Liz. In remembering the bike ride when I met Liz for the first time, I remember thinking how captivating her presence was, and I was drawn to know her better. I found myself thinking, “That’s the beauty I want.”

Such familial inheritances don’t always come to their recipients in “complete” form. “We too often inherit a family’s unfinished business, and when we do, those incomplete narratives are given to us to fulfill,” (Goodall, 2005, p. 98). In one account, a narrator carried on her father’s deep-seated happiness that she directly correlated to his being outside. “I try to push myself in his direction,” she said. “My motivation is to be more like him,” (Nicole). In penning an experience I had with Nicole before my conversations with her began, I wrote, “She is quicker to smile than almost anyone I’ve ever met.” This might be a way of carrying on her father’s deep-seated happiness. Another of the narrators deeply admired her grandmother, who had brought back flower seeds from an adventure in the backwoods of Canada, and now she plants

wildflowers for her grandson to enjoy. “And I knew all my life, all my life, I’m going to be like that. That’s who I want to be,” (Ginny). Each of the narrators in her own way is honoring and fulfilling the narratives they have inherited. The cornfields and “jumping rocks” and frozen rivers from the narrators’ pasts left a lasting inheritance that acted not just as happy memories but sparks of present motivation urging them outside again and again.

Other narrators expressed that their parents did not teach them outdoor skills, and in fact, on occasion, discouraged it. In one account, a narrator’s mother discouraged her from interacting too much with/in nature, because “things out there are scary; things out there are dangerous” (Nicole). Another lamented that her instruction in camping skills had been relegated to an annual weekend outing with the Girl Scouts (Liz). Interestingly, narrators shared that past voices which urged what they felt was undue caution nevertheless influenced their decisions to go outside presently; on occasions when they engage in certain levels of risk, it is at times a push *against* narratives from their pasts. Although Liz did not see outdoor adventures as part of her family inheritance, she has nevertheless forged out this identity for herself.

### **How do Relationships with Others in Outdoor Experiences Shape Women-Teachers’ Narratives?**

#### **Theme 2: Going Outside to Be Together**

Without exception, all narrators placed value on their social interactions outdoors. They commented at length primarily on two types of social interactions: an appreciation for positive interactions with strangers outdoors and the value of ongoing friendships with women with whom they have frequently participated in outdoor activities.

#### ***The Kindness of Strangers***

Several narrators explicitly mentioned meaningful connections with strangers in outdoor activities. On a three-month cross-country journey, one narrator and her companion met and spoke with a variety of people. At the first of their journey, striking up conversations with people they met had been somewhat unintentional. Quickly, however, they both recognized the value and beauty of listening to others' stories. They became more intentional about asking people they met to share something about themselves. In retelling stories from that time, the narrator said that although she had a host of wonderful memories from that time, perhaps the ones she held dearest were of the strangers she met and listened to along the way.

Similarly, another narrator had found treasure in "just the little conversations that you have with people, total strangers" (Susan) as she rolled along the Iowa roads on her bicycle during a cycling event. Another narrator recalled stories of how much she had treasured help from strangers she met during cycling events. "I met beautiful people...there was this collective friendship that was like all of us dream of," she said. "There were no social rules. People just show up and talk to you...it was so touching," (Liz). A school principal became the hero of the story for Ginny and I and other cyclists riding in OK Freewheel after we found ourselves caught in the middle of a sudden storm. He was a stranger to us all, but generously provided shelter and water to us, simply from the kindness of his heart.

### ***Common Bonds: Friendships in Nature***

All narrators told stories about moments they had spent outdoors with friends, and the meanings that held for them. Among the sub-themes which emerged were the value that many placed on being challenged by others to try hard things and the importance of being led into deeper connections with friends through doing and undergoing in nature.

### ***Challenging One Another***

All narrators expressed an appreciation for friends who opened doors of challenge and opportunity outdoors. One narrator, for example, explained that her outdoor friends are “risk takers” and “challenge makers,” (Ginny).

*Women and outdoor adventures have brought me into places in my life that I would have never dreamed I could have done. And it was never presented to me as a young woman or as a child that that's what you can do. And I love how we challenge each other in that way, whether it might be kayaking or rowing, whatever it is, you know, just takes you out of your comfort zone. It has pushed what I thought women my age were capable of doing. Everybody pushes me, and I love that. I crave that. I don't know what I would do without that. (Ginny)*

Similarly, Liz said, “You need people to do the adventure with, and the scary stuff with, and laugh at yourself and laugh at them.” Another shared stories about the Girl Scout troop she led, calling them “high adventure kind of girls” who took her on the “most fantastic ride” of her life (Nicole).

### ***Deep Connections***

Accounts revealed that women valued friendships with outside interactions because they fostered deep relationships. One called her friendships a “lifeline to get out in nature” (Nicole). When I asked one narrator about her friendships with women who spend time outdoors, she was quite emotional.

*I realized what a gold and silver mine I have. And I'm just the luckiest girl in the whole wide world. I'm just overwhelmed, choked up because I'm so touched by it... We look out for each other, and it's powerful to have these shared goals; the shared goals create more quality friendships.*

When another spoke of her friendships, her metaphors turned toward treasure as well. “I treasure those women... There's a deep, deep connection that happens. And not always outside, but it seems to move faster, those deeper knowings and understandings and questions happen between people and the relationships in the outdoors” (Ginny). Her belief is that “people that are drawn to do those outdoor type of activities” are also “the kind of people that are curious and

bound to wonder and open to experiences and enjoy the process of learning... those are the people I want to surround myself with.” Similarly, for Cathy, gardening led to an abundance of friendships and laughter: “They were hilarious. They were great. So I just gardened all the time.”

### **Theme 3: Going Outside to Be Alone**

#### ***The Invitation of Solitude***

While women shared how important the social aspects of communing with/in nature were to them, several also spoke at length about the times they had spent alone outdoors, and its value for them as well. One account emphasized social fatigue after days of cycling continuously with groups of people. “After my first few Freewheels, when you're with people, people, people, people, people, I was like, ‘cut em loose, get rid of em.’ I was crying in the inside of me for alone time on the bike.” (Liz). She shared stories of traveling to Wyoming and to Alaska, just she and her bike, or traveling alone to Texas and New Mexico:

*I'm looking at these huge pines, blue skies, green. I had a book and I did get a couple chapters of the book read, but most of that time was just nothing, you know, just getting to a place of nothing and letting the colors minister to me and listening... just letting in that particular blue and that particular green of the New Mexico forest that I was in. I can step back there right now, and I can breathe it in and let that amazing beauty resonate. It somehow centers me again, and I'm not there... I think the land speaks to anyone who will listen. ... I went to go listen, you know. I went to go see and be present. (Liz)*

Another account emphasized time on the Appalachian Trail that she was able to walk in solitude, even though she was travelling with others. “During the time when I was walking in that solitude, it was just amazing” (Nicole).

#### ***The Dark Side of Solitude: Fear and Gender***

Gender-related fears and often specifically aloneness in nature *as a woman* surfaced repeatedly. I found the themes of fear/aloneness in nature and gender too connected to split them apart organically. Narrators storied fears of wildlife, of storms, and of insurmountable challenges



of myriad types. Liz encountered a grizzly. Ginny encountered a charging bull moose. Nicole encountered a violent thunderstorm. Nevertheless, four of the narrators indicated that being a woman limits what they do outdoors in some fashion.

Stories about solo cycling adventures reflected unmistakable elements of gender-based fear, similar to my experience in my solo California/Colorado trip. Accounts showed narrators processing contingency plans verbally over and over again for reassurance:

*I didn't think through things. Mentally there was just an emptiness, but in that emptiness, you're also still having to tell yourself, "I'm fine. No, no one's going to come up and get me, and if someone does, what am I going to do? I know my contingency plan. I'm going to hear them get through the zipper. I'm not going to be asleep when this happens." You know, you have to talk yourself through those fears. So, gender plays into fears, you know? I get to a campground and I'm trying to figure out where I'm going to camp. And I'm literally looking at each camp site trying to decide, "Is this safe for me?" When I was in New Mexico, it was such a family-friendly place. That's the safest I've ever felt camping. I mean, I actually wondered if I needed to get my bear spray out and lay it up by my head. And that's not really for bears; that's for bad people. It's just for the humans trying to get inside my tent. So I am willing to camp by myself, but I want to be in a campground where if I holler, someone hears me. I'm not willing yet to put my stuff in a pack on my back and hike by myself, you know what I'm saying? Nope. Not doing it because no one's there to hear me yell...You have got feelers and those feelers help you know if you're in danger, but sometimes they lie to you, and you've got to figure out when they're telling the truth and when they're lying. I think that that's what camping by myself does sometimes. It gives me practice. (Liz).*

Likewise, gender plays a key role in determining where she does and does not feel safe pitching a tent when she goes to a campground alone. "I get to a campground, and I'm trying to figure out where I'm going to camp. And I'm literally looking at each camp site trying to decide, is this safe for me?" She singled out a solitary instance at a family-friendly campground in New Mexico where she felt so safe that she actually considered foregoing her normal safety routine. "I actually wondered if I needed to get my bear spray out and lay it up by my head. And that's not really for bears; that's for bad people." She lamented that she wants to camp by herself, but finds that she is limited to campgrounds "where if I holler, someone hears me."

Other narratives reflected similar concerns about solo hiking and camping. “Even though the idea of soloing is very intriguing to me, I don’t know that I ever will take that step. Actually people are more scary to me than being outside” (Nicole). She told me about articles she had read about women who “do stealth camping because they’re not scared of the animals that they may encounter. They’re more scared of the people they may encounter being a solo woman.” There is value camping with the women of the Blue Skies group, but she felt extremely hesitant to camp “even if it was just one other woman with myself, I would probably not do that.” Nicole said that being a woman camping outdoors can have other negative effects. “Not wanting to sleep because you need to be vigilant....to think that the issue now is people, it’s just very sad to me. That’s why I think soloing would be really tough.” She said that wildlife and changing weather are “normal” dangers. “But the human kind, that’s just not normal.”

Other stories reflected awareness that certain exchanges with men in the outdoors had shaped their decision making about outdoor companions. One spoke of valuing a women-only cycling group. “I do not like being in a crowd of ten men [cyclists]...gender, that’s the biggest difference for me,” (Liz). On co-ed rides, she found that she had to keep her “beacon” lit. “I’m a single woman, but I ain’t looking to date. So leave me alone. These men would come up beside me to start to ride, and I’m just like, ‘Oh my gosh, I swear. I’m here to bike, not here to get picked up, you know?’

### ***The Heartbeat of the Creator: An Intersection Between Togetherness and Aloneness***

Some accounts defied neat placement within a single theme. Discussions of the divine touched upon elements of solitary experiences in nature, but also surfaced a profound sense of communing with Another, a Presence beyond themselves. It bears noting that this subtheme did not surface in all accounts. When it did surface, I observed some common elements. The first is

that those who did talk about a divine Presence all made strong connections to communing in nature as a segue into that Presence. One narrator, for example, said that a relationship with God is an important part of her life, and she ties that closely with the time she spends outdoors.

*I don't think I can separate going into nature from the spiritual elements of it. I think nature gives us a heart and a look at the heartbeat of the creator. And I think that part of just being alone in nature is maybe being alone with yourself, being alone with the Lord, trusting him that he's got me. Because I feel like he does have me. I mean, I work alone. I live alone, but there's something different when you get into nature that takes it to the next level. So I think that nature pushes on fears of just being alone, but I have to have it. It cries to me. It calls to me. (Liz)*

Accounts also connected the need to be outside with a divine satisfaction of soul. “I don't just want, I need, I need to have those outdoor experiences. It literally, it fills my soul. That's the deepest places where I find God” (Ginny). In this sense, the gift of nature relates to a Giver greater than herself.

*We've been given this gift of nature. Even some of the verses of the Bible, the whole thought of being like the birds and not toiling because everything's provided for you. That's my connection to nature: look, everything is provided for you here. The water, the food, the beauty, the serenity, all of that's just right here for the taking (Nicole).*

The account also emphasized gratitude.

*You know, earlier in my life, most of prayers centered around asking for something in prayer. And now at this stage in my life, it's more prayers of thanksgiving, you know? It's, it's just kind of been a complete shift in how I pray.*

Another account attributed the power of a Divine to the forces of nature she had witnessed:

*What I found was that moment was so beautiful...all that power of the winds. And in that very moment, I'm thinking about the creator, and I start laughing and I'm like, “I put you in a box. I make you so small in my heart and life. Look at you go.” So I think that's what nature does. It just speaks of him. It's seeing that he's big. Seeing that I'm small; seeing that there are systems in place that are going just fine without my management. The birds are singing. They're getting their worm. They're making babies. The trees are budding and doing their thing and leaves are falling, you know. All of these systems are in play that did not require any attention on my part. So why in the world am I trying to control so much in my life? Let it go. Trust him that He can take care of my system too. (Liz)*

In my own narrative in Chapter II, I wrote of my encounter with a divine Presence when I wandered away from the organized religious structures around me and into nature alone. Some accounts thus reflected access to a divine Presence through nature.

**What are the Implications when Educators who Value Communing with/in Nature Enter Classrooms, Interact with Colleagues, and Model their Paradigms?**

**Theme 4: Philosophies of teaching touched by nature**

Accounts illuminated stories about lessons learned while in nature that narrators carried into the classroom. Some accounts reflected frustrations in which their paradigms clashed with administrators and other educators who did value the outdoors in similar ways. One story recounted leaning on lessons learned while cycling to help push through fatigue and frustration in the classroom. The technology the narrator needed to teach one day failed at the beginning of class during what had already been an exceedingly difficult week personally. In her story, she commented that she had “no reserves...nothing left to give,” (Liz). She had no contingency plans for class, nor did she have the mental reserves to conjure one up on the spot. It was then she remembered a lesson she had learned on her bicycle.

When she thought she had nothing left to give, she told herself, “you just keep pedaling.” Just as on the bike she had counted her pedal strokes ten over and over, she began to count the minutes in class, teaching for one minute, and then the next. “That's exactly what I did on Monday was teach for the next minute, then teach for the next minute, teach for the next minute, teach for the next minute. And I got through the lesson, which I couldn't believe.” By narrowing her focus to small increments of time, as she did when cycling, she found she had just enough energy to teach in each minute. Liz lifted up elements of temporality in this narrative; experiential lessons learned in nature which directly informed the teacher self she brought to the

classroom on that day. The temporal nature of pedaling, the slow, sure progress of not giving up for just one more revolution of the pedal. “Life can take you down to where you have no reserve.... What do you do then? One more minute. Do your best, one more minute.” Liz also credited outdoor lessons with helping her to deal with her chronic illness, transitioning into an ability to “keep a job, my sanity, and be gracious to myself.” She had learned to do her “rolling best,” and not to expect perfection of herself.

Another account described nature's influence in her classroom as foundational. “So much of the work and the curriculum and the programs we designed or I designed and implemented were nature-based,” (Ginny). She believes firmly that a relationship with nature is crucial for young children. “It changes moods; it changes interests.” She posited that learning begins with wonder, “and where do we find more wonder than in nature?” Now as a retired educator, Ginny uses her love of nature to teach her grandson, providing “loose parts” such as rocks and mud to spark his young imagination toward learning.

Other accounts reflected nature’s influence in forming role models for outdoor activities. “The kids know that I'm the person that rides” her bicycle to work many days, one shared (Steph). Due in part to her influence, other faculty members have also begun to commute to work by bike. For another of the narrators the influence is more subtle, but nonetheless important. The entire back wall of her classrooms is a long bank of windows which she keeps open for the view. “I have a great view. I'm up on a cul-de-sac, so I get to see the ponds and the trees across there,” (Cathy). Because of this, she and her students get to enjoy the weather patterns passing by, taking that “long view,” as she called it.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2017) wrote that education which “leads out, through exposure rather than indoctrination,” is education conducted in “the minor key” (p. 34). This

“weak pedagogy” is a strength in attending to “human becoming,” which has little to do with one-way transmission of facts, but has everything to do with “waiting and presenting,” and with opportunities “to experience and become more attentive” (p. 34). In providing students with gentle offerings such as “a long view” from a window or the quiet wonderings about a teacher riding her bicycle to school, students and colleagues are exposed to “human becoming” in a way which opens possibilities to them as well.

***“Most schools, the way they're designed, don't even have windows anymore.”***

In accounts, nature appeared to be an underappreciated value in formal education. “It's funny, but the teachers on either side of me always keep their blinds closed, which I don't really understand...why would you do that?” (Cathy). “Most schools, the way they're designed, don't even have windows anymore...I was blessed to have a window in my room for 13 of the 15 years I was at [my school], but their windows were few and far between in that school” (Nicole). She postulated that in the future, schools may be less and less likely to have windows in their building because of potential risks. “And I thought, well, let's think of that, because you're denying kids a glimpse of the outside because you're scared.”

Other educators and administrators were among those who did not appreciate the educative value of nature. One account reflected an “outdoor day” at school, and she had been asked to take a group of students outside with digital cameras. She took the assignment seriously, having her students take various photos she had hoped for them to use in a project on which she could provide feedback. At the end of the day when she took her cameras and photos inside, the administrators told her they were going to dump them and erase them.

*And I thought, well, how are you ever going to give the kids feedback? Or, you know, I thought we would take pictures, and then I'd say, you know, pull up one picture from each kid and talk about how really phenomenal they were taking pictures of nature. But*

*obviously there was no time for any feedback.... That's about the closest to nature that I got at [my school], and it was a fail (Nicole).*

In these accounts, school structures and educators undervalued nature as an educative force, a source of frustration and missed educational opportunities for narrators.

### **How do Women-Teachers Experience Nature?**

#### **Theme 5: Doing and Undergoing: Two Ways of Being With/in Nature**

Dewey (1934) defines “doing” as a person acting upon her environment; “undergoing” he defines as the environment acting upon her. Dewey’s reference to these as “outgoing and incoming energy” proved foundational to my analysis. Using Dewey as an analytic lens, the narrators' stories modeled distinct avenues of communing outdoors: *with* nature (undergoing) and *in* nature (doing).

#### ***Undergoing: Being with Nature***

**Mile after mile I walked, without the slightest sense of exertion, dozing heavily and dreaming constantly.**

**-Charles Dickens, *Shy Neighborhoods, All the Year Round***

Accounts illuminated women’s investment in the experience of ‘being with’ nature which differed from experiences of ‘being in’ nature. This nuanced difference points to intention and focus rather than a specific activity. Aligned with Dewey’s ideas of “undergoing,” being *with* nature manifested in the narrators’ stories when communing with nature appeared as intrinsically worthwhile, rather than as a means to an accomplishment. When they attended to nature’s mental/emotional “gifts” (peace, connection) or its sensorial “gifts” (sights, fragrances, sounds, and tactile sensations) fully, other stimuli fell away from their attention.

**Nature as Companion.** One facet of this theme emerged as accounts constructed nature as a companion. For example, experiences of undergoing with/in nature brought out “simplicity”

in its loveliest form. “I like to go to the Botanic Garden and *just kind of* walk around,” (Cathy, emphasis mine). In this instance, “just kind of” provides insight into the purpose of being in that outdoor place and in that moment. There is walking which is doing; walking with a certain destination or speed of pace in mind. “Just kind of” walking connotes a different intent altogether. It speaks of a sauntering, a leisurely pace, an activity in which nature is an end in itself, rather than merely a means to an accomplishment. One type of walking is doing; the other is undergoing.

The same narrator felt inspired to walk by British novels she had read when she was younger, so it is apt to turn to Dickens to provide another example of this distinction. “My walking,” Dickens (2015) wrote, “is of two kinds: one, straight on end to a definite goal at a round pace; one, objectless, loitering, and purely vagabond,” (p. 95). In this “objectless” walking, Dickens might have experienced the incoming energy of which Dewey wrote, receiving from nature, rather than expending energy on behalf of a predefined objective.

One account touched on a key to *attending* to nature as one would a companion.

*I think the land speaks to anyone who will listen. And I think that's a different kind of vacation than going out just to hike. Like there's times just to go on a hike and say, 'Here's a challenge. I hiked the tallest place in Texas.' ... That's a different hike than 'I went to go listen,'” and “I went to go see and be present” (Liz)*

This was her objectless loitering, purely vagabond, in which she simply received from nature; an undergoing. Another account emphasized the priority of living “fully in the moment on the journey” and “fully be a participant of that place,” (Ginny), an agent that created “beautiful” experiences.

**Nature’s Sensorial Gifts.** Accounts reflected the necessity of attending slowly to the nuances of outside to receive its gifts. As Nicole noted, “I can sit on my swing for an hour and stare at the same scenery and never get bored. I can watch the birds, or I can watch the way the



little leaves on the trees move.” She learned to fine-tune her senses to the elements that nature sends her way.

*Instead of hearing the outside sounds as a unit, I've started picking them apart and saying, okay, now I don't just hear birds. I hear individual birds. And this one sounds different from this one, which sounds different from this one.*

This is not a passive reception of nature's incoming energy; rather, it is a sensory awakening.

The account emphasizes the narrator's active participation in receiving the sensorial gifts of nature, maximizing what she sees, hears, feels, and learns by attending to each incoming detail.

For another narrator, the gift was a glimpse of the mountains. “I just love looking at mountains. I never got tired of that. I never took it for granted when we lived in Colorado, just seeing that view of the mountains on the horizon” (Susan).

Similarly, another story revealed value found in investing time to take in nature's gifts of sights, sounds, fragrances, and tactile sensations. The narrator spent hours in her hammock allowing nature to act upon her.

*I'm looking at these huge pines, blue skies, green. I had a book, and I did get a couple chapters of the book read, but most of that time was just nothing, you know, just getting to a place of nothing and letting the colors minister to me and listening...You can be in nature a really long time and never have listened, not even see the colors, not see the texture of the trees, not see what the atmosphere of the air around you feels like (Liz).*

By listening, seeing, and feeling, she and nature co-created a memory that she returns to and which affects her even in retrospect. “I can step back there right now, and I can breathe it in and let that amazing beauty resonate. It somehow centers me again, and I'm not there.” In each account, the main focus of attention was on nature's sensorial bounties they received by attending to and communing with her as a companion.

One account reflected the value of going about in nature slowly. Pushing back on another's urging to walk more quickly, she preferred instead to draw in nuances of her surroundings with her camera:

*A friend said, "Well, you've got to stop taking pictures." And I thought, "But that's why I do this." I tend to take a lot of nature photos, I think, because that's very appealing to me. Most of my photos, there's nobody in them. I never shoot people. That's a very nature-oriented thing for me, and I really like that. I like seeing something that is maybe ordinary, but it's extraordinary because you captured it.*

**Nature's Mental/Emotional Gifts.** Nature as a lifter of emotional and mental states also surfaced. One account told of a tree on her grandmother's land which was "my space, my connection, my place, my peace" where there was "always a sense of release from tension and absolute connection with place...a place of absolute freedom, of calm, of creativity" with "none of the tension coming into my world," (Ginny). Stories praised "getting to a place of nothing" (Liz), a place of little or no activity, when the priority was not activity but rather upon the being in nature and upon allowing nature to soothe, comfort, relax, or minister peace.

### ***Undergoing: Slow Ontology***

**I wonder if anyone else has an ear so tuned and sharpened as I have, to detect the music, not of the spheres, but of earth, subtleties of major and minor chords that the wind strikes upon the tree branches. Have you ever heard the earth breathe?**

**- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening***

Jasmine Ulmer (2016) wrote that slow ontology is a particular manner of being in the world which includes surrendering control over the pace and even the content of learning. We cannot manipulate Slow ontology, nor rush its outcome (Ulmer, 2016, p. 2). Scholarship based in slow ontology means the learner is left wondering at times, as the outcome, too, is outside her control. She is the observer, engaging in slow scholarship as the subject of her learning reveals

itself to her as it chooses and to the degree that it chooses. It is, in short, the process of becoming by knowing phenomena slowly. Implicit in scholarship informed by slow ontology is the idea that a slower pace deepens knowledge. The tyranny of deadlines and minimum word requirements and strict formulations of reporting outcomes melt away, and the learning and becoming as an end in itself is allowed to surface.

The stories reflect attending to each detail of sensorial input, immersion, and learning as examples of slow ontology. Backyards provided places where narrators could be, do, and learn at nature's pace. One narrator listened for the distinct sounds when the elements of nature chose to gift them to her. Another watched the colors of the pine trees seem to shift as the sun slowly crossed the sky. This narrator's account harmonized with my own when I had become a student immersed in nature as a child, learning through the slow ontology that the clover provided. By adopting modes of moving and seeing, waiting and wondering at the pace of nature, we experienced the richness of nuance and understanding that slow, prolonged exposure with an element in nature can bring.

In my own story, by the time the color green became a discussion in the classroom, I had already engaged with it experientially at the leisurely pace of summer afternoons. There were no time constraints or deadlines; it was nature's pace, not mine, that yielded each new variation of color as sunlight drifted across the clover leaves. The result was that I gained what I believed to be a superior understanding of green(s). In learning the colors from nature rather than a human teacher, my potential to understand green(s) was unbounded. In an elementary classroom, the Procrustean understanding of green was confined to a visual demonstration on a piece of paper. Even if the picture my teacher held up had displayed every Pantone variation of green, (it didn't), it still would have been bounded and static, unable to "teach" an exhaustive spectrum of green or

its chameleonic shade-shifting abilities in sunlight as well as nature had as I observed it operating at its own pace.

The concept of slow ontology proved salient to the narratives overall. Nature, our stories indicated, seems to embrace slow ontology with great relish. It is under no obligation to alter its pace to suit anyone, and must be sat with, listened to, engaged with slowly - an undergoing - to receive its gifts. Study in/of nature, therefore, compels the learner to engage on a moment-by-moment basis and teaches her senses to attend across extended spans of time. Narrators' expressed need to go outside, to "see the leaves blowing and see how the grass changed from yesterday to today," (Liz), as well as to fully surrender to its rhythms, to "getting to nothing" (Liz) to be fully immersed in the blues of the sky and the greens of the trees exemplify the power of nature's slow ontology to exercise one's senses, to parse out potentialities, to gain endurance as a learner, and to attend across time while undergoing its slow unfolding.

### ***Doing in Nature***

On the other side of the scales is doing, what Dewey calls outgoing energy (1934). "Doing" in nature surfaced in narrators' accounts of activities focused on organized events, accomplishments, and challenges. In these types of accounts, the finer details of nature often took a back seat to the physical and mental challenges the activities in nature presented. Nevertheless, doing *specifically in nature*, rather than just doing without regard to location or environment, was a consistent narrative thread. One narrator, for example, searched ardently for someone who could teach her about camping and cycling. "I'm just basically shamelessly begging her to take me with her. You know, would you please be my friend? And would you take the camping, because I want to, but I know that I have to learn from someone" (Liz). Narrators placed such great value on endurance events such as Freewheel and RAGBRAI that

they continued to participate in them, even when they understood how physically and mentally challenging they would be. “We just were on the verge of tears...the absolute, excruciating, helpless feeling of knowing that you have done something that is so stupid...and the next morning you get on your bike and do it again” (Liz). “Oh, it didn't kill me. So it was an adventure. That's kind of a little theme that we go on all the time” (Nicole).

Nicole also remembered with tremendous nostalgia and admiration her doing in nature alongside the Girl Scout troop she led.

*We did camping. We did the Appalachian trail. We did rock climbing. You name it, those girls wanted to do it. And they were never afraid of anything. It was just amazing to me. I hit the jackpot with that group.*

Accounts reflected doing in nature as “capacity builders,” such as Ginny’s, which helped in self-discovery. “Whether it might be kayaking or rowing, whatever it is, you know, just takes you out of your comfort zone. It has pushed what I thought women my age were capable of doing.” Just as Nicole described her desire to watch the daily changes in the leaves and grass on her land as a *need*, Ginny needed to venture out and *do* in nature. “I want to maintain the physical capabilities that I can do this until the day I drop from this earth. Or I don't just want, I need, I need to have those outdoor experiences.” Even when doing in nature embraced a slower pace, accounts reflected women’s great satisfaction from it. “I just gardened all the time, and when I was hot or sweaty, it would just jump in the pool” (Cathy). Similarly, “We have a pull-behind trailer that we take with our truck. We take all our stuff, and we park it in one place, and we stay there and adventure out from the campsite,” (Steph).

## **Theme 6: Becoming or Discovering Who They Are**

### ***A Time and Place for Fear and Difficulty***

**It is said that before entering the sea  
a river trembles with fear.**

**She looks back at the path she has traveled,  
from the peaks of the mountains,  
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.  
And in front of her,  
she sees an ocean so vast,  
that to enter  
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.  
But there is no other way.  
The river cannot go back.  
Nobody can go back.  
To go back is impossible in existence.  
The river needs to take the risk  
of entering the ocean  
because only then will fear disappear,  
because that's where the river will know  
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,  
but of becoming the ocean.**

**- Kalil Gilbran, *Fear***

Another theme across stories was the value of difficulty, or the doing of hard things. These accounts reflected words and phrases like “being pushed out of my comfort zone” to describe occasions when facing a challenge outdoors. One narrator commented that she “need[ed] people to do the adventure with, the scary stuff with” (Liz.). Another also used the word “need:” “I don’t just want, I need to have those outdoor experiences” (Ginny). Another said that sometimes when she’s outside, “being miserable is okay,” and “if it doesn’t kill you, it’s an adventure” (Nicole). Member interpretation of words such as “needing” to be “pushed” from a “comfort zone,” sometimes “being miserable is okay” emphasizes their value placed on struggling. Such accounts reflected ties between struggle and growth.

Within Dewey’s (1938) conception of experience, he saw growth as a “reconstruction of experience,” and further that “every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality” (p. 47). Growth, in Dewey’s (1916) view, “must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope

with later requirements” (Dewey, 1916a, p. 56). It is telling that he chose to describe the future ability as a skill of coping, of grappling with something difficult or challenging. The accounts reflecting the value of struggle expressed the struggle as a “need.” The accounts reflected their need to continue pushing themselves outdoors, to the places and situations which called on them to prepare for deeper and more expansive experiences which would enable them to cope with challenges in the future (Dewey, 1938, 1916).

None of the accounts expressed narrators’ having “arrived” or grown enough through outside. Each account indicated in some way or another that each experience prompted a desire for the next, even the difficult ones. “Growth,” wrote Dewey (1916), “is a continuous leading into the future,” (p. 56). One narrator encapsulated it beautifully by saying, “When you have those heightened sensory experiences which allow you to take it moment by moment and become keenly, keenly aware of who you are, where you are, and what's going on, *that gets you to the next moment*. It's addictive” (Ginny, emphasis mine); a continuous leading into the future.

### ***A Place for Boundaries and Acceptance***

Another side to this theme merits examination as well. While most accounts reflected difficulty as a value, most also addressed the importance of boundaries and limits. Without exception, a common thread throughout stories was working within some sort of self-determined boundary which was perhaps fluid and subject to change, but nevertheless important for others to accept or honor those they had chosen for that season, event, or even that day. Although at first blush this seems incongruous with the previously-stated value of being “pushed out of a comfort zone” as a means of growth, these two sides of the coin actually play out in harmony with one another both inside the narratives they shared and from a Deweyan perspective as well.

One of the narrators, as an example, found that her happiness in nature went hand-in-hand with her having agency in determining not only which events she would participate in, but also to what degree (distance, speed, etc.) that she would participate. “It helps me to know and to respect my limits and to understand that, you know, maybe it's okay to not want to do everything that I could do. Because I want to feel happy when I'm outside,” (Steph). In a similar vein, another offered praise for companions on a cycling event. Although she was just a few miles from their destination, she determined that she needed to stop riding and finish the journey in the van which accompanied them. Rather than urging her to push through her pain, every other member of the group readily accepted her decision. She perceived this as validation, and it resulted in a deepened sense of trust in the members of the group.

How does this flow harmoniously with previous assertions of, “If it doesn’t kill you, it’s an adventure”? Here, we can turn once again to Dewey, whose idea of growth helps to elucidate and explain the seeming incongruity. Dewey (1938) posited that growth depends on whether an experience

promotes or retards growth in general. Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions? (p. 36).

In each instance, the key seemed to be agency. Accounts reflected the value of challenging opportunities, when joined by others who provided support, but as importantly, if they declined those opportunities, or chose to not finish the event, they were no less accepted or supported. These accounts of the importance of women’s agency before and during events created “conditions for further growth,” rather than “shut off the person who has grown in this



particular direction” (Dewey, 1938, p. 36). Choosing to decline doing an activity because it was too difficult in that particular moment is a form of growth - growth in a particular direction.

When their choices were honored and respected, conditions for further growth flourished.

### *Chapters instead of One Short Novel: Reframing in Retrospect*

**It is not down in any map: true places never are.**

**-Herman Melville, *Moby Dick***

A key tenet of narrative inquiry is that stories change. They evolve in retrospect, weave into one another, and new observations and lessons stick to them along the way. This happens because humankind structures their lives through stories, using them to interpret their pasts and present; as people change and grow, so too do the narratives through which they understand and explain who they are (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). An important piece of the theme of discovering and/or becoming is therefore found in this continual evolution of narratives.

In Chapter III, I shared a personal story about traveling alone to outdoor places in Colorado and California. Much of the time I spent alone outdoors there, I was keenly vigilant of my surroundings and was mentally engaged on the matter of my safety at all times. Elements of threatening weather, choppy waters, and camping solo as a woman resided either at the forefront of my mind or lurked naggingly ever present behind my other thoughts like a pebble in my shoe. Sometime later after I returned home, I was surprised to find that I retold my stories about those experiences in a different light. Through the passage of time and with further consideration woven in with my memories, there had been a Deweyan consummation of the experience; the struggle and fear had intertwined with the multisensorial undergoing I had also experienced in those places. Growth had enriched what was now a more holistic understanding of those events. I

had grown and was, in a very valid sense, a different person in the retelling of the stories than I was when I experienced them in the moment. I reframed the experience as a triumph and catalyst of growth, part of a long relationship to the outdoors I continue to cultivate.

This phenomenon of retrospective meaning making surfaced repeatedly in the narrators' stories. Accounts reflected retrospective meaning making that changed the message of the experience. One narrator expressed it this way: "When you live in the moment, you don't have time to make the story, you're living the experience," (Ginny). Another spoke of an experience swimming. In the moment, she had felt the frustration of embarking on a strenuous activity for which she had not adequately prepared, but later remarked that she had good memories of that time: "It was good. I mean, you know, I think that we all learned a lot about ourselves" (Steph). Another remarked that times she had hiked in the pouring rain "and you're soaking and you're cold and you're tired and your feet hurt and the moment you're not too happy" (Nicole). Nevertheless she said she has a "happier kind of retelling that story with a positive slant." Each time she retold a story of a difficult challenge she had maneuvered through, "you get a little piece of happiness inserted in your brain." These retrospective accounts solidify a narrative of the outdoors and learning of self.

Additionally, stories are situated inside contexts which also evolve. Cultural, institutional, familial, and other social phenomena press in and exert force on stories, shaping and coloring them (Clandinin, 2013), and this on an ongoing and shifting basis. Together, these elements affected stories that the narrators and I shared with one another, a phenomenon we discussed explicitly at times. One mentioned telling stories in retrospect, sharing,

*You have a bigger context...The story at almost 65 is different than the story I would've pulled together at 15... more knowing, more time to experience those same emotions over and over and over in different places. The feelings don't change, but the context does...so*

*then your story just gets bigger and bigger and all the pieces come into it. That story has chapters instead of just one short novel.*

### ***Becoming a Different Kind of Beautiful***

Several accounts reflected images of human beauty narrators had witnessed outdoors. Often in these instances, they not only observed what they called beauty, but expressed a desire to embrace that kind of beauty as part of their own identities. Visions from the distant past and encounters of a more recent kind evoked language that heralded both inner and outer human beauty. Quite contrary to much of the banal physical depictions in modern culture, the narrators drew rich depictions of a more complex beauty and took great care to describe each occasion lavishly. It flowed into their stories. One account, for example, spared no words to pay rich homage to a family member she considered to be beautiful. In remembering the photograph of her aunt participating in RAGBRAI which was displayed in a frame at her grandmother's house, Liz commented, "There are different versions of women's beauty...but that is what I want to be when I grow up."

Another narrator's face lit up in nostalgia and admiration as she described a beloved grandmother. A "tiny thing" and a "little mighty force," her grandmother had "picked herself up...by the bootstraps" when her husband died an untimely death, and she "made a life for herself" (Ginny). This grandmother had always wanted to have an outdoor adventure in Canada, and so she did just that. When she returned, she brought back a memoir of the adventure by planting daisy seeds she had harvested on her trip. Ginny's eyes danced as she recalled her grandmother recounting that adventure each spring when the daisies bloomed, recalling that as a child listening to her grandmother's stories, she dreamed, "When I'm a big person...that's what I want to be."

Additionally, accounts reflected finding beauty in self-acceptance fostered at least in part through nature. Women narrated finding beauty in being “comfortable in my own skin to make my mistakes, to be slow, to be fast, to be successful, to fail. That’s a takeaway for me,” (Liz); in being able to “know and to respect my limits and to understand that, you know, maybe it’s okay to not want to do everything that I could do.... What I’ve come to understand about myself is that I’m out there to have fun, and I’m not out there to prove anything. I’ll be happy if I can do it, but I don’t mind saying, “Okay, I think I’m really done,” (Steph). Several accounts alluded to the inner beauty women had seen in people they had met while outdoors. One account encapsulated it best: “I met beautiful people. Unlike I’ve ever met...and when you get into your darkest places, people would roll up... they just knew, and they would just take care of you,” (Liz).

***Like the petals of a tulip, fully open: Emic Language reveals Nuances in Meaning***

I titled theme 6 “becoming *or* discovering who they are” to reflect the narrators’ common attention to growth in identity and sense of self because of time spent in nature while also differing in terms of the *type* of growth. Some accounts referred to “becoming,” to their lives having changed as something new (belief, emotion, etc.) had been planted inside of them, but other accounts reflected their discovery of traits already inside them, dormant and waiting for experiences to nourish them to germinate and bloom. One narrator’s “storied accounts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4) was particularly poignant in surfacing this subtle but distinct difference. As I verbally lauded her tenacity and bravery in a particular experience, I asked her if she felt like experiences such as that had changed her. Her explanation was beautifully illuminating.

*I can't say that it has changed me. It was in there all the time. My sense of adventure, my sense of being a part of that place. It was more of a discovery than a change. But what it did was just absolutely lay it out, maybe like the petals of a tulip, fully open. I think it's the way we are meant to really live. And those experiences, those places, were the*

*capacity builders. And I loved it. Loved it at the moment, too, I mean, talk about being on the edge of your comfort zone. Well, beyond the edge of your comfort zone and then finding the capacity where you start thinking differently, you assess differently. Again, all of that's in there. We have those capacities, but you learn how to shut out the chatter, that stuff that's not helpful whatsoever. And you focus keenly on what you need to do to manage that moment and the next moment and the next moment and the next moment.*

### **Theme 7: Sehnsucht: A Never-ending Journey to/with Nature**

**I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now...Come further up, come further in!**

**-C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle***

A final thread which ran through the narratives is decidedly complex. It is an ever-present but rather translucent urging which the German word *sehnsucht* might best describe. “This emotive German word has no direct counterpart in English, but can perhaps best be described as an ‘internal, painful longing for someone or something’” (Magill, 2019, p. 1). Often, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly what the longing is for, nevertheless it is something which would make life better, more complete. Always, it is just out of reach. Each of the narrators’ accounts reflected moments of *sehnsucht* in one fashion or another. Because of its complexity, I will only introduce as a theme here in Chapter V, but will reserve discussion of it for Chapter VI, where I delve into the greater implications and significance of this study.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **BROADER IMPLICATIONS**

#### **A Synthesis of the Study**

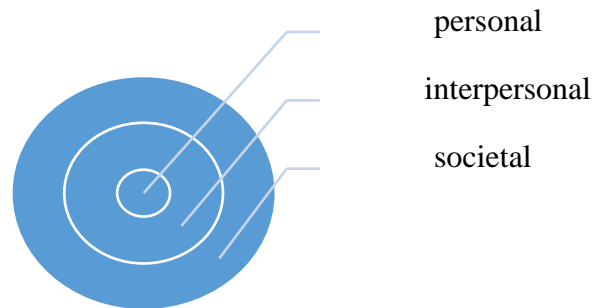
The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to ‘come alongside’ women educators who value and therefore spend extended periods of time outdoors to consider how they story those experiences and events. This study sought to illuminate what our stories revealed about our experiences and how the influences of those experiences in nature may have affected our worldviews, views of self, and our educational paradigms.

This study, like many narrative inquiries, was born of a “wonder” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 124) rooted in autobiographical soil (p. 41). It began as a personal endeavor to better understand the magnetic pull of nature on my own life, coaxing me out into experiences that often taught and transformed me. As I considered the “wonder” further, I looked beyond my personal experiences and began to ponder my friendships with other women-educators who also communed with/in nature. I observed that, like me, they also appeared to find meaning and understandings of self through time spent with/in nature. It became increasingly salient to my own understanding of myself as a woman and as an educator to consider the possible intersections between my experiences in nature and theirs.

This urged me toward a deeper study of relationships between women-teachers and nature. I examined existing literature on connections between women, teachers, and nature, and through that a multifaceted research puzzle surfaced: although there was an abundance of literature which examines educators' use of outdoor spaces as classrooms, there was a paucity of literature which focused on teachers who journey outside in their personal time for their own edification, or on the nuances of meaning-making that takes place in such experiences. This became the springboard for my formal academic study.

I considered at length which of the qualitative methodologies would best guide a study such as this; which would give space for the nuances and intricacies in experiences and storying I sought to better understand. Narrative inquiry answered the call. From the perspective of many narrative researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 2008), narratives are building blocks of culture. Humankind are narrative beings who structure their lives through stories, interpreting their pasts and understanding who they are through them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry offered me a way to delve dialogically into the stories of women-teachers through the interviewing process and provide space for the nuances those stories would elicit. Following this model, my study used my own narratives as a point of departure and initial understanding; from there I came "alongside" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 48) the other narrators of the study, entering their world in some manner to engage in extended and meaningful storying with them. In this way, the teachers and I wove together richly-nuanced unfoldings of our lived experiences and pondered and shared cohesive strands.

**Figure 19** *Concentric circles of meaning-making in narrative inquiry as described in Chapter I.*



In Chapter I, I used the metaphor of concentric circles to describe layers of meaning-making in narrative inquiry and to provide a visual representation for the progression of the study. In Chapter IV, I foregrounded the innermost circles of personal and interpersonal meaning-making by detailing the stories of the six other narrators of the study: Ginny, Liz, Nicole, Steph, Susan, and Cathy (pseudonyms). I began the chapter by “introducing” the narrators with a story of my own of an outdoor experience I had shared with each one. I then shared their stories, honoring their narratives to the greatest extent possible by foregrounding member terms, emic perspectives, and “indigenous concepts” (Patton, 2015, p. 543), and by refraining from interjecting extraneous theory into their narratives. In Chapter V, I moved to the next concentric circle. I foregrounded themes which emerged across stories and which elucidated facets of the inquiry questions of the study to find richer meta-understandings of commonalities and convergences. In casting my focus from the smaller to the larger circles, I sought to examine multiple layers of meaning making and connection.

### **Moving outward to the Societal Circle**

In this chapter, the ballast of larger cultural and social elements which may have previously been shrouded in invisibility are illuminated and examined. In the stage of narrative inquiry which looks at broader implications of a study, the narrative researcher has moved away from data, called field texts within this methodology, and looks now to analysis, or research



texts, to determine “‘So what?’ and ‘Who cares?’” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 35). Her ontological commitments require her to maintain the ethical commitments she has made to her participants, remaining alongside them throughout, while at the same time composing “research representations that speak to scholarly and public audiences” (p. 4). Therefore, although I consider wider implications based on the field texts from the study, I seek to honor and acknowledge the participants, even here.

In the remainder of Chapter VI, I connect the thoughts and themes from Chapter IV (narrators’ individual stories/portraits) and Chapter V (thematic elements that arose from the analysis of stories) to consider questions that analysis of the data surfaced. I push deeper into the Deweyan elements which framed this study by considering the wider implications of experiences, as defined by Dewey. Additionally, I connect and dialogue with additional literature as appropriate to apply elements of the study more broadly, and I consider the implications for praxis and teaching that the study suggests.

This research extends the body of knowledge on the empowering potential of outdoor interactions for teachers (corporeally, emotionally, spiritually, physically); it offers a more meaningful understanding of how, as teachers, these stories might flow into others’ lives, such as students, family, and friends, and to what effect; and it illuminates the contextual situatedness (Huber & Clandinin, 2005) of teachers who spend time with/in nature to the larger circles of place, temporality, and sociality, therefore linking these individual narratives with the broader conversation of teacher embodiment and well-being.

### **Broader Implications and Questions Worth Asking**

The purpose of the study can be distilled to its simplest form as sensitizing readers to “questions worth asking” (Clandinin, 2000) about the larger significance of teachers spending

time in nature rather than a grand social narrative or “distillation of maxims” (Clandinin, 2000) common in traditional social science inquiry. In other words, the “answers” to the inquiry questions are often themselves questions, questions which invite further speculation and further inquiry. I found this to be one of the greatest strengths of the narrative inquiry methodology as I worked through this study. In the following section, I begin by considering the broader implications which arose from the inquiry question, “How do women educators experience nature?”

### **The Potential of Storying to Reinforce Emotive Bonds and Forge Identities**

In Chapter II, I examined a study which suggested that the Inuit populations under investigation told stories about the land which reinforced their bonds to it (Raffan (1993). With each retelling, the bonds to the land were reinforced further, thus the stories became a ballast which grounded and strengthened emotive bonds. Findings from this study also suggest that narrators’ stories of doing/undergoing in nature reinforced their emotive bonds to nature and storying of who they are. Additionally, a study reviewed in Chapter II by Wattchow and Brown (2011) found that outdoor education among Australian and New Zealand students established a stronger sense of identity with the land and engendered “place-responsiveness” that informed learners’ identities (p. 77). Similarly, accounts in this study highlight narrators’ identities as connected to nature. Meanings and ideas of self have concretized as they have passed on the stories again and again. In most cases, that connection, or place-responsiveness, has informed their understandings of self.

How, then, might such findings suggest possibilities to the readers of the study? Since narrative inquiries find their significance “when they become literary texts to be read by others not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by

readers” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42), it bears considering how these accounts, this storying may spark connections and ideas for others and new possibilities in this arena. Might it follow that other teachers might read these literary texts and think toward new testings of their own life possibilities? Could others imagine themselves in these stories, as teachers similarly shaped by nature? Might teachers who choose to spend more of their personal time communing with/in nature also find heightened place-responsiveness and a connection to the land? As ontological beings, how might their identities take on the facets of one who engages relationally with the earth? How might this storying propel women into future self storying? How might this influence their respective fields of teaching? How might teachers “imagine their own uses and applications” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42) which in turn generate new avenues of thought that create ripples going out in their spheres of influence?

### **Hard ≠ Bad**

In Chapter V, I addressed the theme of “becoming or discovering who we are,” and within this, the subtheme that nature has helped participants of this study learn not to equate hard with bad. Additionally, the data revealed another side of this phenomenon lurking in the data: all of the narrators engaged in ongoing reflection of boundaries which enabled them to separate the “hard” from the “too hard.” What degree of difficulty is too much? At what point does the scale tip from beneficially-difficult to detrimentally-difficult at the moment and place I am currently in? The answers to these questions, the data showed, is fluid and subject to change from season to season, from day to day, and at times, from moment to moment. There’s an ongoingness to this reflection that becomes in itself a skill which can be honed. Such ongoing reflection, the data suggests, can engender deeper knowings of self; it can provide clarity to navigate choices which arise suddenly; it can engender self-acceptance and internal peace; and,

importantly, it can render visible the value of challenges and difficulties. The women who emerged from the narrations were seekers, active agents, questioners, philosophers, growers, women oriented to becoming. It bears noting that no victims were narrated; no beaten down teachers tired of being pummeled by inefficient policies or public criticism.

I considered where further research might unfold additional layers of this phenomenon and apply it to educational arenas. There are already myriad avenues for teachers to hone the skill of balancing the scales of difficulty. They make choices about how to approach classes, student engagement, how to enrich, how to remediate, where and when to pursue professional development. They weigh considerations such as potential benefits and anticipated workloads for their students. They balance professional demands and personal pursuits and commitments. Is there, then, a place where learning to balance difficulty *specifically in nature* could have a unique place in growth for educators, a place that is perhaps underserved by other avenues?

A primary defining characteristic of nature is that she necessitates agency. She cannot be scripted and she is famously unpredictable. To go into her presence requires continual decision making by the teacher/learner. Nature quietly but steadfastly refuses to conform to predetermined outcomes, thus, if nature could have a special place in teaching the skill of ongoing reflection, of balancing hard and too hard, it could be exactly in her mercurial essence, her intractable unpredictability which calls upon each individual to practice agency at each and every step, to learn to move with a fluidity of reflection that embraces continual change and understands that sometimes, hard is good. Continued research could illuminate and further this discussion.

### **Beauty in the Balance of Doing and Undergoing**

**I think you should learn, of course, and some days you must learn a great deal. But you should also have days when you allow what is already in you to swell up inside**

**of you until it touches everything. And you can feel it inside of you. If you never take time out to let that happen, then you accumulate facts, and they begin to rattle around inside of you. You can make noise with them, but never really feel anything with them. It's hollow.”**

**-E.L. Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler***

Among the findings illuminated through this study was that teachers commune with and in nature in varied ways. Stories revealed that each of these ways of communing, with and in, fundamentally differs in purpose and outcome, and both are important for women to experience in balance. I first examine this phenomenon through a Deweyan lens, and afterward, bring other salient scholarship into the conversation. I consider, for example, the value of slow ontology (Ulmer, 2016) and the value of what anthropologist Tim Ingold (2017) calls weak pedagogy (2017) for narrators' stories. I consider these paradigms in regard to learning from/in nature and also other environments of learning, and I think into what these could offer in terms of teacher growth and development. I look at the connections between this particular study and the broader issues that are relevant to others and to the field of education. Based on these, I make recommendations for further research.

Many of the narrators engaged in both “doing” and “being” in nature, as noted in Chapter V. Dewey (1958) is emphatic that experience can be both *of* and *in* nature. “It is not experience which is experienced, but nature--stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience” (p. 2, emphasis in original). To transcend the veil of separation and to maintain the harmony of experience and nature is to reap enormous benefits. Experience “reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an infinitely elastic extent,” (Dewey, 1958, p. 4). I returned to field note data to further consider the balance of doing and undergoing. Through this lens, themes of doing in nature and being with nature in women's stories connected to larger issues about learning from

nature. For example, words that Ginny had shared leapt into sharp relief, and I realized she had gotten right at the heart of what benefitting from balancing doing and undergoing can look like:

*There is such a peace, and it's so calming, at the same time it's all those opposites. It's calming, and it's terribly exciting. It's no stress, and then there are moments of deep stress when you don't know where you're going to camp, or are we in a safe place? I don't know. You go from brain activity to deep, intuitive activity. You have the time to really, really connect. It's these extreme opposites that we live as humans along the way.*

These were words she used to describe experiences in which she was both doing and undergoing, moving along at the pace of nature, one moment lingering in slow ontology and in the next, experiencing events which required enormous amounts of mental, emotional, and physical energy. Experience which allows “getting at nature, penetrating its secrets...deepens, enriches and directs further development of experience” (Dewey, 1958, p. 2). This exercising of her senses, of her ability to attend at different speeds and in different ways, equipped her to successfully navigate “these extreme opposites the we live as humans along the way.”

There is more to balancing doing and undergoing than just shifting from one to the other. Reflection and intention come into play and create meaningful frames of reference. “An experience has pattern and structure,” Dewey (1934) wrote, “because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship,” (pp. 45-46). In the continual flow across the spectrum from doing to undergoing and back, not merely in alternation but with reflection, chords of the relationship strengthen and grow. This, then, became Ginny’s “rhythm of everyday experience” whereby the “world becomes an integral part of the self” (Dewey, 1934, p. 208; 1996, p. 109). The balance and reflection foster the flow, encourage her continued growth, and bring her a deeper understanding of her self, “like the petals of tulip, fully open.”

Conceptions of growth and becoming in nature were central. In Chapter V, the narrators related myriad ways of balancing doing in nature, from gardening and walking to cycling,

rafting, and climbing mountains. Doing in nature can call the senses and the corporal being into a mutually-attentive harmony if applying intentionality and reflection. The one balancing the incoming and outgoing energy of doing/undergoing in nature takes her cues from the natural elements unfolding before her on a moment-by-moment basis, foregrounding now the auditory, now the ocular, now the tactile as the environment necessitates; adjusting her physical and mental faculties to nature's chameleonic weather, landscapes, and elements. To understand the value of this balance, in the next section I will consider what a lack of such balance can look like.

*Experience of Incredible Paucity: When Doing and Undergoing Are Out of Balance*

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

**-John Muir, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir***

*Too Much Doing, Too Little Undergoing*

Dewey (1934) stressed the importance of establishing a balance between doing and undergoing, writing that “zeal for doing, lust for action, leaves many a person especially in this hurried environment in which we live, with experience of incredible paucity” (p. 46). I spent time in areas of Colorado during the writing of this chapter, and Dewey was weighing heavily on my mind. I became attentive to the people I encountered outdoors, considering the ways in which they appeared to be communing with/in nature. During this time, Liz, Susan, Nicole, Ginny, and I faced the formidable challenge of climbing the “fourteener” in Colorado that Nicole had referred to in her narrative. As we trekked along that mountain trail, natural treasures all around and the frenzy of the city far removed, I observed that, although we were certainly doing in nature, each of us also relished in moments of undergoing; of slowing, listening, and attending

to the elements around us. Ginny stopped and greeted a whistling bird by returning its call. The rest of the group listened with delight as a conversation ensued between the two. Nicole and Liz stopped at regular intervals to observe the sunlight on the landscape and to take a photograph when the light was just right. I listened as most of the people we passed greeted us, and we greeted them.

“Beautiful day!”

“Great to be outside, isn’t it?”

“There’s a break in the trees just ahead, and the view is incredible.”

“Lovely trail.”

If there were no words exchanged, there was usually a warm smile. Their good tidings brought a surge of joy each time and fostered a sense of community and kinship with them in my heart. The final push to the summit was so difficult that Ginny and I both considered turning around. A climber on his way back down stopped to encourage us, giving us just enough of an emotional and mental boost to make the final push. I thought back to the stories that each one of these women had shared about the importance of warm social interactions and the kindness of strangers they had encountered outdoors, and there we were, experiencing the same magic once again.

I could not help but contrast that experience with the occasions when I walked alone along the paved paths in the more populated towns nearby the following week. I and everyone I passed were outdoors just as before, walking, jogging, or cycling, yet the social atmosphere was entirely different. Had I not just been on the mountain trails in the days immediately prior, I might not have noticed the distinction to such a degree. Because I had been, the change was staggering. Almost no one greeted me, no matter how heartily or warmly I spoke to them. I



started out boldly with statements such as, “Great to be outside, isn’t it?” but upon receiving little reciprocity, I retreated to safer phrases such as, “Good morning.” Still, there were few people who returned a greeting. Some smiled in return. Many did not acknowledge the greeting at all. Because I had basked in the prior camaraderie, I felt each rejection acutely. My spirits fell, and I found myself wanting to retreat to my room. Eventually, I stopped risking saying hello because I didn’t like the way it felt to receive little or nothing in return.

Later, I reflected on these two experiences. I remembered that again and again, the narrators had storied with admiration how much they valued the timely, positive social interactions they had had with others outdoors, friends and kindly strangers alike. Reflections from these experiences and further consideration of my field notes eventually raised what I consider to be a question very much worth asking. Why was there such a drastic difference between the greetings on the mountain trail and in town? Having spent so much time with Dewey, I could not help but wonder, was there an imbalance between doing and undergoing in nature among some of the passersby in town which over time had begun to manifest itself; a divorce of experience from nature, a paucity which was playing out before me in quite empirical ways? Was I witnessing a “zeal for doing, lust for action,” in the “hurried environment in which we live,” that had thrown off the balance between doing and undergoing? (Dewey, 1958, p. 46). Dewey (1958) cautioned, “What is called experience becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name. Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection. An individual comes to seek, unconsciously even more than by deliberate choice, situations in which he can do the most things in the shortest time” (p. 46). I had only anecdotal evidence, of course, but I could not push the question aside.

To some, Dewey (1958) wrote, experience is “something extraneous which is occasionally superimposed upon nature, but it forms a veil or a screen which shuts us off from nature” (p. 1). They are on the world, but not in it. My experience with the passersby in the Colorado mountain town were uncomfortable, even though they were exceedingly brief. Dewey (1938) described it quite accurately by writing that “[a]n experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted” (pp. 25-26). Each successive rejection of my salutation led to less confidence in the next offering, until finally, I stopped altogether. If too much doing and too little undergoing can engender callousness, therefore, it bears considering what can result from an imbalance of too much undergoing.

*A Flitting and a Sipping: The Harm of Too Much Undergoing, Too Little Doing*

**The adventure is over. Everything gets over, and nothing is ever enough. Except the part you carry with you. It's the same as going on a vacation. Some people spend all their time on a vacation taking pictures so that when they get home they can show their friends evidence that they had a good time. They don't pause to let the vacation enter inside of them and take that home.**

**-E.L. Konigsburg, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler***

Dewey (1934) asserted that the reverse of the doing/undergoing phenomenon is likewise detrimental; too much undergoing and too little doing can hinder experience as well. When the goal is “the mere undergoing of this and that,” he wrote, experience is blurred (p. 46). “The crowding together of as many impressions as possible is thought to be ‘life’ even though not one of them is a flitting and a sipping,” (Dewey, 1934, p. 46). When this is the case, “nothing takes root in the mind,” (p.47).

The data from this study bore this out as well. Liz, for example, had recently vacationed with a friend who “didn’t have a goal to be outside.” Liz bemoaned the experience at length, not

because she did not care for that person greatly, but because she had come to understand firsthand the value of including both doing and undergoing outdoors in her experiences. When her activities had to align with the those of someone whose experiential preferences weighed heavily toward undergoing and mostly indoors, she felt the discomfort of the imbalance. Liz had been fed by a stream of previous experiences outdoors which had been rich and consummative. While doing in nature, she had shared the communion of kind strangers, “a family atmosphere” in which “people rooted for me when they didn't even know me.” While undergoing with nature, she had been “ministered to” by the colors of the pines and blue skies in New Mexico, and listened to what the mountains in El Paso had to say. Together, these had led to her growth and learning; they had germinated and were ready to speak into her present experience as continuity.

This pushes the conversation toward continuity of experience, which in the Deweyan view is the ongoing process whereby one’s experiences can lead to growth and learning, and can flow into and inform future experiences, which then lead to further growth and learning, and so on. The efficaciousness of this ongoing process is dependent upon the quality of one’s experiences. Dewey (1934) frames these distinctions in quality through language of between “experiences” and “an experience” (p. 35). “Experiences occur continuously,” he wrote. “Oftentimes, however, the experience is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience;” rather, “we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (Dewey, 1934, p. 36, emphasis in original). An experience has a “consummation and not a cessation;” it is “intellectual,” “emotional,” “purposive and volitional,” (p. 38). There is a wholeness and completion rendered by applying reflection and intention to an experience. When this happens, “every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues” (Dewey, 1934, p. 37). Experiences

which are rich, balanced, and completed, therefore, not only foster learning and growth in the moment, but deposit potential into one's future experiences. When Liz's experiences vacationing with her friend proved to be inchoate, incomplete, and lacking in balance for her in terms of her need for doing/undergoing outside, she was disappointed and uncomfortable. "The last time I vacationed with her, I said I could never do that again, but I did," Liz shared. "And this time, I'll say it again."

Dewey (1934) cautioned, "What is called experience becomes so dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name" (p. 46). An imbalance resulting in too little doing and too much undergoing, an excess of the passive gathering of impressions, stifles growth, according to Dewey. The importance of reflective growth through a balance of doing/undergoing that nature invites, as well as the ramifications when an imbalance exists, raise questions worth considering. As I wrote this chapter, however, I found that the implications of this finding intersected, converged, and overlapped with the implications of the next section, "Embodied Learning versus Absent-Body Learning" to such a degree that I chose to look at them together at the end of the following section.

### **Embodied Learning versus Absent-Body Learning**

Women's narratives pointed to a commonly-held value of learning through embodied ways. Additionally, literature examined in Chapter II suggested that outdoor learning strengthened connections between the "lived body" and the embodied mind, potentially improving cognition, given the right pedagogical engagements (Thorburn and Marshall, 2014, p. 129). Maurice Merleau-Ponty stressed that the process of knowledge acquisition is an act undertaken together by the body and mind, which work together to form meaning: "a visible-seer, a tangible toucher, an audible listener" (Crossley, 1995, p. 46). As an example, one

narrator has augmented her learning of nature by teaching herself to parse out individual birdsongs so that she is aware not only that birds are singing generally, but she is attuned to the details of the individual sounds. Another narrator used tactile input to learn about surfaces of stone and wood; another took in the fragrances of the conifers as a way of centering and remembering. As a child, I learned about the myriad shades of green by sitting with the clover as the sun passed along its arc overhead. The reverse of embodied learning is absent-body learning, an environment in which the body is de-emphasized and at times invisible, viewed as the material object whose task it is to transport the mind, the thinking subject, to the classroom so that it can teach or learn (Christofidou, 2001).

The accounts from this study revealed that venturing into nature and garnering rich, consummative experiences under nature's tutelage problematized absent-body learning for these educators. In a group discussion of this topic, I asked if their embodied learning experiences had prompted them to try to break the seated and still dynamic in their classrooms. Four of the six narrators indicated that they had felt some degree of tension or disagreement with building administrators when attempting an embodied learning experience or when voicing a concern about absent-body teaching. They expressed feeling like they were looked upon as "loose cannons" for offering "radical" or impractical ideas. Programs that did embrace embodied learning were "splinter programs." Even a single-day attempt to reach a meaningful consummation of an outdoor photography project was "a fail."

### **Implications for Praxis in Education and Recommendations for Further Research**

Consciously considering doing/undergoing or its place in education is not a common discussion in American classrooms. Embodied learning and teaching processes are often shifted to the periphery. In different ways, each of the narrators addressed this. Ginny, for example,

valued and employed embodied pedagogy, but pulled no punches when she storied the dichotomy between her own nature and movement-based teaching and the norms in place around her. “It is not standard practice. So I'll start there. Everything that I did either through my work or work with others in this area, we were a splinter program.”

Ginny has experienced embodied learning in nature and has embraced it as an important component of her educational paradigms. Traditional classroom teaching and learning, however, do not always create the same conscientization. “When the body is erased in the process(ing) of scholarship, knowledge situated within the body is unavailable” (Ellingson, 2017, p. 18). Consciousness of the body all but disappears in many traditional classrooms as soon as students sit and become immobile, or when teachers are confined to a podium or small area in the front of the room. If going into nature has rendered the body visible as a co-learner for narrator-educators in this study, and if those activities have the potential to subsequently problematize seated-and-still teaching norms, it raises certain salient and pressing questions. What pressures could/do the reified norms put on other teachers to conform to the absent-body standard themselves, and to what potentially limiting or deleterious effects for both teachers and students? Could it possibly follow that other teachers who engage in intentionally embodied learning might also become more sensitized to absent-body norms in their educational settings? What could such a paradigm shift mean for educational outcomes and teacher well-being?

The research puzzle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of this study began as I became increasingly cognizant of what I perceived to be a discrepancy between the ways I teach and the ways I learn. I observed that when I had the freedom to learn in my own preferred manner, I gravitated toward the outdoors. It was there I found I could interact sensorially with nature to co-create deep, impactful meaning from embodied consummative experiences which were both

educative and transformative. Learning together with nature has taught me to embrace not only truth *and* beauty but also the truth *of* beauty, encountered through repeated consummative experiences and reflection. In nature I have become a lifelong learner and an ardent pursuer of “that which matters most,” an idea which ever evolves in my mind.

This path of personal learning and growth, however, has problematized my own pedagogical methods and those I see operating around me. When I enter outdoor spaces and grow/learn through embodied experiences, it is often accompanied by a conscientization of moments in my own classroom environment in which I have perpetuated absent body (Leder, 1990) teaching practices. I tend to set aside the self as an experiential and transformative being, disregard my constructed and nostalgic and evaluative reality, and the resulting teacher self experienced by my students is inchoate. Stated differently, the actualized self that nature has helped to nourish and teach is not fully invited into my classroom. Thus embodied learning informs who I am as a woman, but problematizes who I am as a teacher working inside an educational system which reifies absent-body norms. This study, however, reminds us that teachers are themselves ontological beings; those who have learned from nature as teacher can reflect the multidimensional and growth-oriented being who teaches, rather than simply an instrument for students.

Systemic norms notwithstanding, it is nevertheless true that what I desire most for my students is that *they* learn to think critically and unconventionally; that *they* learn to love with greater acceptance and understanding; that *they* discover the vast profundity of their own strength which will then empower them to pursue that which matters most. I must therefore ask myself if my means of interacting with and instructing my students encourages such learning and growth. Might my pedagogical *modus operandi* discourage the governing ideals I so greatly

esteem? How do the concepts of literacy and learning exhibited by my teaching self contradict those of my learning self? Considering, then, other similar classrooms around me, I must ask if seated-and-still norms also discourage teachers from bringing their richly-nuanced, multidimensional and growth-oriented selves into the classroom; if embodied learning in these places is marginalized and discouraged as well. If embodied teaching and learning are discouraged, to what effect is it so?

### **Tiny and Transformative: The Value of Small Increments of Time Outside**

Data bore out that journeys into nature don't have to be major events to engender transformation. "Tiny moments" spent in her presence can revive, transform, and add to one's story. This led me to ponder where might "tiny moments in nature" add to the conversation of beneficial practices in education? Where do such practices already exist, and how might they flourish in other ways and other educational spaces? What new possibilities might arise for teachers and students as educators look into new avenues of curricularizing small increments of time in nature into school days?

In Chapter V, I examined the theme of slow ontology and the practice of learning and knowing at nature's pace which emerged across the narrators' stories. Delving into lessons the narrators had learned in/through nature, I found implicit and explicit examples of slow ontology and its effects. There are manifestations of temporality in nature's mode of teaching which bear consideration here; she does not rush when rushing would undermine consummative processes. Each stage of growth, motion, expansion, and reduction happens as quickly or as slowly as it happens. This pace runs counter to much that happens in American classrooms. Most work comes with a deadline which unplugs the learner from each task in the curriculum at the turn of a calendar page, and at times prematurely. Such deadlines often require learners to speed over



valuable but delicate nuances of the phenomena of study un- or under-noticed, and the learner fails to see what was missed. Ingold (2018) asked the pointed question, “Why bother to attend, we say, when we already know?” (p. 9).

Nevertheless, the reigning measure of student learning is “progress,” and progress is most often defined by how much and how quickly students can accumulate a particular quantity of information or skills. Teachers and administrators speak in terms of how “far” they need to go by the end of the year, and how much material they can cover in their given 175 student days-in-the-seat. Complaints of “not enough time” are frequent among educators. How can teachers cover the required amount of material in such a short time? What if the need for additional remediation arises? What if a teacher must miss a week of school because she becomes ill? Any number of scenarios have the potential to derail the closely-monitored schedule which dictates whether a particular class will be successful on its state-mandated, state-created end-of-instruction (EOI) exam.

The pace of many Western classrooms renders slow ontology impractical, and at times, impossible. This staccato march through curricula encourages ‘strong’ pedagogical methods. Defined by anthropologist Tim Ingold (2017), strong pedagogy foregrounds grand narratives, absolutes, fixed deadlines, and one-way transmission of facts. In our conversations, Ginny observed that “learning begins with wonder.” Is wonder allowed to flourish more freely in classrooms that make space to engage in slow scholarship? In *Shackles of Tradition* (1985), the narrator articulates Franz Boas’ belief that one’s value “lies in the cultivation of the heart” (17:40). If Ingold (2017) is correct in claiming that good education should emphasize attention rather than transmission (p. 2), a teacher’s emphasis on one-way transmission could preclude her from noticing that a rushed deadline may have crushed rather than cultivated students’ hearts.

Was a feeling of euphoria, pride, and importantly, *consummation*, that accompanies a job well done lost? Was a heightened connection to great classic literature lost? Was the wonder of contemplating or creating a work of art lost? Was the learner left not knowing what she doesn't know, stifling future learning and growth? It is impossible to speculate the full magnitude of loss when the stone that begins the ripples is never cast into the water, but in the rush to transmit a mandated quantity of information, teachers often do not have the luxury of taking the necessary time to consider lost ripples. For the teacher who is required to rush through a project, what has she lost in growth as an educator? How could her teaching have taken a new dimension of depth and meaning for her students if the pace had not been manipulated, nor its outcome rushed? (Ulmer, 2016). Put differently, might the value of learning that cannot be measured by an EOI eventually outweigh the value of the learning that can?

Ingold (2017) wrote that weak pedagogy is teaching which “leads out, through exposure rather than indoctrination,” (p. 34). Weak pedagogy takes the time to lend attention to “human becoming” which has little to do with one-way transmission of facts, but has everything to do with “waiting and presenting,” and with opportunities “to experience and become more attentive” (p. 34). I can think of no better explanation of how nature teaches than this. It “affords the possibility of exposure,” offering “exercises that stretch our attention towards the real and its truth, not the truth about the real, but the truth that comes out of the real...in the experience” (Ingold, 2017, p. 34; Masschelein, 2010, p. 283).

Nature conforms poorly to traditional Western pace of instruction but is a master instructor of weak pedagogy. Nature, in other words, has proven herself to be a worthy environment in which to carry out slow scholarship. She is at once the ontological underpinning, educational space, and phenomenon of study. She is a faithful and wise instructor, and in

learning about her, she teaches us about ourselves. She offers rich potential to correspond with learners in their human becoming and discovery of their own “that which matters most.” What do we miss when minor key teaching (Ingold, 2017) and slow ontology (Ulmer, 2016) are rendered virtually impossible by top-down-mandated strong pedagogy mechanisms such as EOI exams? What do teachers lose? What do students lose? What does society lose? Must those losses be measurable to be considered important enough to address? Each of these are places where research can reach in to consider, question, and problematize, perhaps even narratively, how teachers or students story these “immeasurable losses,” or what others may be doing to ameliorate these losses.

The data from this study reveals a group of educators who have found that experiences in nature can be deeply educative. Not only is nature a catalyst for educational experiences, the data shows, but it is a locus of transformative growth and self-understanding. Notwithstanding, educational scholarship often limits its focus to the formal spaces of school buildings. The teachers who participated in this study all teach or taught in public school systems. They are all well-acquainted with formal school spaces; they know the value of learning offered in traditional classroom settings. Yet each one of them has chosen to add the pedagogy offered by nature as a channel whereby they augment their personal learning and growth. Each has found a need for more or different forms of learning. Each has searched for her own personal balance of doing and undergoing. Each has taken on embodied learning to varying degrees. Each has embraced a type of slow scholarship and weak pedagogy that nature has offered her.

Extrapolating further from this train of thought, a primary ontological commitment of those holding various roles within education is to consider the primary purpose of school and of formal education. It is therefore incumbent upon individual educators to continually engage in

reflexivity by considering how they can best help fulfill that purpose for the students they serve. As an educator, I have participated in many professional development sessions which address this governing principle and have turned to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a point of departure on this topic. It therefore seems salient to turn to Maslow's research here as well. Maslow hierarchized human needs such that the pinnacle of having one's needs met comes when she has reached a state of self-actualization, a term Maslow (1954) "loosely described as the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing the best that they are capable of doing" (p. 150). Among the findings from his research, Maslow (1954) found certain clear tendencies in self-actualizing people. Below, I have outlined some of these tendencies as described by Maslow, followed by examples where these characteristics surfaced in the data. I will then use these "pairings" to consider the broader implications and opportunities for praxis and research that they illuminate.

According to Maslow's (1954) research, many self-actualizing people "can accept their own human nature in the stoic style, with all its shortcomings, with all its discrepancies from the ideal image" (p. 155).

*I think that that's something for me that I've gotten out of cycling or anything I've done outside now as adult is just being comfortable in my own skin to make my mistakes, to be slow, to be fast, to be successful, to fail. That's a takeaway for me. (Liz)*

Maslow (1954) described many self-actualizing people as "[g]enerally unthreatened and unfrightened by the unknown" (p. 154).

*I remember that moment where I had to decide that I'm the one in charge and I can't be scared anymore. And it was like, that whole thing just lifted off of me. It was definitely an epiphany... if I give up that fear, I can experience so much and be comfortable with experiencing that. (Nicole)*

Maslow (1954) wrote of self-actualizing people that "[t]hey live more in the real world of nature than in the man-made mass of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs and stereotypes

that most people confuse with the world” (p. 154), and “[t]heir behavior is marked by simplicity and naturalness, and by lack of artificiality or straining for effect,” (p. 157).

*All the way through my childhood, I kept thinking when I grow up, that's what that's, who I want to be. That's the beauty I want.... there's different versions of women's beauty, you know, but I was like, that is what I want to be when I grow up. (Liz)*

In describing her need for simplicity, Cathy said, “I think in terms of like now I get to live in this tree house. This is really cool, you know?” As she pondered the point further, she added, “I think as I get older, I just get more and more childish and that's fine.”

For many self-actualizing people, “having a larger horizon, a wider breadth of vision, of living in the widest frame of reference, *sub specie aeternitatis*, is of the utmost social and interpersonal importance,” (Maslow, 1954, p. 160).

Nicole’s father taught her to embrace happiness and live each day thinking: “I get another day. So I want to push myself in his direction. I do think that my motivation has to be more like him.”

*I have two favorite words, hope and courage, and absolutely believe my activities throughout life, from childhood to today and probably tomorrow have developed courage and have developed a really deep, sincere belief in hope. And those are my two favorite words that I am constantly drawn back to that I have experienced in nature and outdoor activities. (Ginny)*

Many self-actualizing people “positively like solitude and privacy to a definitely greater degree than the average person,” and “they have the ability to concentrate to a degree not usual for ordinary men. Intense concentration produces as a by-product such phenomena as absent-mindedness, the ability to forget and to be oblivious of outer surroundings,” (Maslow, 1954, pp. 160-161).

*After my first few Freewheels, when you're with people, people, people, people, people, I was like, 'cut em loose, get rid of em.' I was crying in the inside of me for alone time on the bike. So I went and I bought everything to do bike touring. And I knew that the touring would be by myself.... And then I spent the first evening by myself on the river.*

*And all I did was sit there and listen to the water go over the stones. You know what I'm saying? I didn't think through things... mentally, there was just an emptiness. (Liz)*

“Self-actualizing people have the wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naïvely, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, often even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others... Thus for such a person, any sunset may be as beautiful as the first one, any flower may be of breath-taking loveliness, even after [s]he has seen a million flowers” (Maslow, 1954, p. 163).

*I can sit on my swing for an hour and stare at the same scenery and never get bored...I can watch the birds, or I can watch the way the little leaves on the trees move... it brings me a lot of enjoyment to just look at movement,” (Nicole).*

*I just love looking at mountains. I never got tired of that. I never took it for granted.... just seeing that view of the mountains on the horizon. I just love it.” (Susan)*

Of self-actualizing people, Maslow (1954) wrote, “There were the same feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision, the feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and also more helpless than one ever was before, the feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe,” (p. 164).

*I become very meditative about permanence and non-permanence, you know? [Trees are] older than I am, and they'll be here probably when I'm gone...I think that that's something I draw a lot of meditation from when I am with nature is just seeing how small I am, and how big the world is. I think it's good for giving yourself an ounce of humility. (Liz)*

Self-actualizing people “can be and are friendly with anyone of suitable character regardless of class, education, political belief, race, or color. As a matter of fact it often seems as if they are not even aware of these differences, which are for the average person so obvious and so important. They have not only this most obvious quality but their democratic feeling goes deeper as well. For instance they find it possible to learn from anybody who has something to teach them-no matter what other characteristics he may have,” (Maslow, 1954, p. 167).

*I think I was really taught a lot by that first Freewill, the family atmosphere, the kindness, the way that people rooted for me when they didn't even know me. I want to root for others like that. And so that spills over. You don't just want to root for others in cycling. You want to root for them in everyday life. (Liz)*

I limited the pairings between Maslow and the data above, but had I wished, I could have given many more examples of Maslow's descriptions of a self-actualizing person surfacing in the data from this study. The data therefore suggests that each of these women meets at least some of Maslow's criteria for self-actualization. It is absolutely not within the scope of this study to impose correlations or causations. It is within its scope, however, to consider the questions that putting scholarship into conversation with the data raises. Here, the data is rich with questions which push us to consider implications on praxis and avenues for further research. If these women have achieved at least some level of Maslow's self-actualization and are able to describe these qualities quite organically as they story their experiences of outside, how might this speak to education?

Specifically, if helping the students to rise up through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a goal of education, how might the examples within this data offer ideas for pedagogy which does the same? The literature reviewed in Chapter II revealed that abundant scholarship exists which considers outdoor scholarship on outdoor and/or environmental education (Adden, 2016; Philpott, 2017; Thorburn & Marshall, 2014). My study findings suggest that further research is warranted into connections between experiences in nature, and particularly in balancing doing and undergoing in nature and embodied learning as possible paths toward self-actualization for both teachers and students alike.

### **Sehnsucht: The Journey and the Core of a Teacher's Heart**

**[I]t is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it**

**beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. Wordsworth's expedient was to identify it with certain moments in his own past. But all this is a cheat. If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.**

**-C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory***

It seems imminently fitting to return to C.S. Lewis for the last piece of literary wisdom with which to season this study. Lewis (1994), who led me out as a child alongside Peter, Susan, Edmond, and Lucy to places where adventures began, often touched on the notion of *sehnsucht*, a deep and ultimately inconsolable longing for something which cannot be reached, a “country we have never yet visited” (Lewis, 2001, p. 31). *Sehnsucht* pines acutely for *something* -- an ideal, a place, a feeling -- something we find we cannot put into words. The realization comes somewhere along the way that there is no arriving at any place, no satiation which slakes the longing once and for all. *Sehnsucht* drives us toward an intangible essence, a spark, a piece of magic, an arrival to a destination in which lies the point of it all. And like the writings of Lewis, *sehnsucht* lurked implicitly inside our stories.

“I feel it on a daily basis. I need to go outside” (Nicole).

I just love looking at mountains. I never got tired of that. I never took it for granted (Susan).

“There are people that have that need to get out, see something different... I think that was the impetus that pushed people to be explorers and to be pioneers” (Cathy).



“I don't just want, I need, I need to have those outdoor experiences. It literally, it fills my soul” (Ginny).

“Something in me really loved this, loved it a lot. And I'm going to do it again. I have to do it again” (Liz).

Rather than discourage us on the journey to something we do not/have not/cannot fully reach, *sehnsucht* pushes us onward with a renewed sense of purpose, of hope, of joy. We respond to it as it deserves, “to be faced as a lifelong companion inviting us to reflect on our lives and grow in character...once we stop fighting and start listening to ‘sehnsucht’, it holds useful lessons for us” (Schnorpfeil, 2018, p. 1).

It is in these “useful lessons” that the broader implications lie. The data bore out that growth from consummative experiences happened for the narrators along the way in this pursuit. Nature has helped to teach this group of women-educators who they are; it has been a ballast in their journey of becoming/discovering and self-actualizing. They have learned a rhythm of moving through and with nature, and like the perfect teacher, nature has tailored the rhythm uniquely to each individual. They have found their own balance of doing and undergoing inside that rhythm. Like a perfect symphony, the rhythm slows to an adagio in certain stages and speeds to allegro in others. The myriad nuances of what it means to be with/in nature have shaped the rhythm like water flowing over rocks. Though the rhythm sounds different for each woman, they have learned to walk beside one another nonetheless, and the journeys continue because it is their hearts’ desire.

“Those heightened sensory experiences allow you to take it moment by moment and become keenly, keenly aware of who you are, where you are, and what's going on, that gets you to the next moment. It's addictive,” Ginny told me. “It helps me to discover more of who I am,

my capacities and capabilities.” Liz spoke similarly: “That's changed my life. I can't get enough of it now. There's always, what's the next adventure? Where's the next challenge? The challenge becomes life-giving. It changes you somehow.”

It is important to underscore that these are the voices of *teachers*, women whom I've come to know as dedicated and passionate educators, and at the core of a teacher's heart is a love of passing knowledge on. For a teacher, knowing something is never enough; she needs to pass it along, to teach it to others in ways that she hopes will catch. Just as it occurred to me while listening to Ginny's stories about seeds, like plants which take in sunlight and water and continue to grow and make new seeds, these teachers go out into nature and gain new experiences, doing and undergoing, trying and learning; metaphorically taking in new sunlight and nourishment from those rich experiences which nourish them and produce new “seeds.”

Ginny's stories of her grandmother and grandson reminded me that seeds contain knowledge and opportunity, but they do not *only* contain these things. A seed contains life. When a seed is planted, it produces something which will produce more seeds. A seed therefore produces *and reproduces* life. There is continuity. The questions this metaphor raises pertain to the seeds which educators who value and commune with/in nature may bring into the classroom: lessons, stories, examples, heart- and head-level connections. When they are given proper soil in which to sow such seeds, how might it enrich the educational and/or personal journeys of those with whom they interact? In this soil, will there be planted a desire to “discover more of who I am, my capacities and capabilities”? Will another be inspired to ask, “Where's the next challenge?”

What, then, becomes the role of educational institutions and systems in giving educators “proper soil”? “[I]t is rare,” wrote Bochner (1997), “to find a productive scholar whose work is

unconnected to his or her personal history” (p. 433). If educators are “given the soil” to connect their personal histories and their ties to nature with their pedagogy, might it open pathways of understanding to students who themselves experience *sehnsucht*, and who may benefit from embracing its complexity as a doorway to growth? Might someone else learn the value of doing hard things through the stories of experiences in nature that they have heard?

### **Endings Held Open, Rather than Conclusions**

Clandinin and Murphy (2009) wrote that “[e]ndings need to be held open in narrative representations” to “invite meaning making on the part of the reader” (p. 601). They caution that the narrative researcher should not feel wooed by the “seduction of coherence,” or the need to present a tidy conclusion or a moral: “Both experience itself and the research texts we compose to represent experience are partial and necessarily incomplete” (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009, p. 601). In the opening chapter, I stressed that, as others have noted of their experiences (Adden, 2016; Coble, 2003; Friedley, 2019; Raffan, 1993), learning with/in nature has had profound influence on my ability to think critically and unconventionally, to love with greater acceptance and understanding, and to exhume a version of self-at-peace from layers of decay generated by technological addiction and urban frenzy.

This study was an effort to offer a more meaningful consideration of how other teachers storied their experiences in nature, to understand if they too had found that learning with/in nature had influenced their paradigms. It was an effort to understand how their stories and experiences of nature shaped their personal conceptions of being/becoming; of how these stories have flowed into others’ lives, such as students, family, friends, colleagues, and administrators, and to what effect; I sought to illuminate the contextual situatedness (Huber & Clandinin, 2005) of teachers who spend time with/in nature to the larger circles of place, temporality, and

sociality, and to link these individual narratives with broader conversations, such educational paradigms and teacher well-being. Lastly, I sought to illuminate educative potentials of consummative experiences with/in nature.

Although I posed questions in this chapter which I felt the data raised when considered through the scholarly and theoretical understandings of Dewey and others, there are no morals or conclusions to offer from this platform. I did not attempt to “yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42) or to recommend avenues of change. Rather, I attempted to bring “the academic and the personal into conversation with each other” (Bochner, 1997, p. 433); to bring a “campfire conversation to an academic setting” (Liz). The culmination of the work is, therefore, an invitation to others to read this inquiry into our stories, “not so much for the knowledge they contain but for the vicarious testing of life possibilities by readers of the research” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42); an invitation to continue these conversations, to add to the stories, to extend the ripples, to deepen meanings and significance, and, I will add unapologetically, to consider stepping into nature’s presence to see what she may teach.



### **The Pedagogy of Nature: Do Hard Things**

**The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable.... It’s not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time.**

**-John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America***

The summer I wrote the last chapter of this study, I ran a race. I've run races before, but this was unlike any race I had run previously. This particular race went up four miles to the summit of a mountain and down six miles on the other side, making a winding, lopsided, and technical loop. I had felt a hodgepodge of emotions leading up to the event. It was further than I had run in a long time. Its elevation demands were nothing I could train for properly in Stillwater, Oklahoma. I had little experience with trail running overall. It was a distance that needed mid-run fuel of which my digestive tract is famously intolerant. I had never set eyes on the location and had no firsthand knowledge of exactly what I would be getting myself into. The majority of participants from previous years were locals who knew the terrain, and comparing their finishing times with a projection of my own indicated there was a possibility I could end up on the mountain alone.

But this race went through a forest of coastal redwoods in Northern California. It would put my feet on a single-track trail padded with soft, fresh-fallen conifer needles which send up their fragrance with each step. It would surround me with gentle giants above and a floor of ferns and clover below. The promise of these proved stronger than all the fears and what-ifs I had replayed on a loop since the day I dared to consider the possibility. Do hard things.

**Figure 20** *A field of supportive clover along the path of the run (2021).*



I will never forget the first time I saw a grove of sequoias as a young teen or the hush that fell over me as their quiet presence froze time. Though I left them that day, they never left me. They planted inside me a longing to return which pulls me back to them faithfully, despite the distance. Each time I revisit them I am no less dismayed, as I was this summer when I stood among them again, old friends, awestruck in the silent spirituality of their presence.

A friendly race volunteer and I struck up a conversation prior to the event. “You’ll need a ladder for that fourth mile,” he grinned with a side-eyed glance which communicated he was being both humorous and also completely serious. I had experimented with mid-run fueling options and finally found success with a mixture of water, salt, and maple syrup, a cocktail I felt sure would be irresistible to the bear population of which I am terribly afraid. I strapped a ten-ounce bottle onto each hip and hoped it wouldn’t become a condiment for some bear’s breakfast. Do hard things.

Like most of the other runners there, I had propped myself up with the full complement of technological gadgets I use every time I run: a smartphone to power my music and gauge my distance, speed, and, in this case, elevation in real time; a smartwatch on my wrist for instant access to that information, and earbuds. It wasn't long after the start of the race that I realized my modus operandi of running wired up for the sake of improving my run, goal number two, was acting as an impediment to goal number one, which was simply to be there fully in that place and in that moment.

I thought of Cathy, whose interview had been such an eye opener for me. Her experiences outside were truly an end in themselves, and cast into stark contrast the times that my own experiences outside had become merely a means to an end. I could not let that happen; not here, not among the redwoods, their presence so deserving of honor and their home so far from my own. I remembered that Ginny had said, "Nature has gifted you an opportunity to be in a place, fully, intricately involved in that moment, in that place." I slipped my earbuds into my pocket and gave my senses over fully to the forest. The reward was instantaneous. There's an echo which a forest gives to birdsong, a benevolent, haunting music which comes from all directions at once, which travels straight into the core of the soul and inscribes itself indelibly on the memory. This became the music of my run and impoverished forever all other melodies.

Like many teachers, there are words of wisdom I repeat often with my students, messages which, because of their intrinsic value, I hope will take root. One of these is, "Do hard things." There's something in the doing of hard things that reveals pieces of ourselves to ourselves which easy things cannot. The view from the proverbial mountain top is lovely, but the soil in the valley is more fertile. The dirt and shadows of the valley are where the redwoods and the ferns and the clover grow, and it's where we grow, too. Do hard things. It's a mantra whose value I

have learned in great part from nature. Though she is all around us, there are parts of her which can be seen and felt and heard and breathed only through the doing of hard things. She is a faithful and wise instructor, and in learning about her, she teaches us about ourselves. As I pushed into the fourth mile and saw that the race volunteer had been accurate in his assessment, the gentle giants above me looked down and whispered softly, “Do hard things.”

**Figure 21** *A grove of friends, (2021).*





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## Appendix A



### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: 02/19/2021  
Application Number: IRB-21-4  
Proposal Title: Educators' Experiences with Nature  
Principal Investigator: Glenda Riveros  
Co-Investigator(s):  
Faculty Adviser: Lucy Bailey  
Project Coordinator:  
Research Assistant(s):  
Processed as: Exempt  
Exempt Category:

#### **Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved**

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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

**This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.**

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.

4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-7443377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Oklahoma State University IRB

VITA

Glenda D. Riveros

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE PEDAGOGY OF NATURE: TEACHERS' REFLECTIONS ON MEANINGS  
MADE WITH/IN OUTDOOR SPACES

Major Field: Social Foundations of Education

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Foundations at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2021.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Ministry at Tennessee Temple University, Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2014.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs at Mount Vernon College, Washington, D.C. in 1991.

Experience:

Stillwater High School, Stillwater, Oklahoma. Spanish instructor, 2016-present.

Adjunct Professor of Foreign Language Instruction and Assessment, First and Second Language Acquisition, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 2017-2018.

Enid High School, Enid, Oklahoma. Spanish instructor, 2014-2016.

PCS High School, Portland, Oregon. Spanish instructor, 2013-2014.

OBA High School, Enid, Oklahoma. Spanish instructor, 2005-2012.