

Drinking from the Wellspring

Drinking from the Wellspring:  
An Embodied Inquiry at the Confluence of Ecological Identity,  
Water, and Wellbeing

by

Rachel Farr

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Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Supervisor: Dr. HILARY LEIGHTON

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of Rachel Farr's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled  
Drinking from the Wellspring: An Embodied Inquiry at the Confluence of Ecological Identity,

Water, and Wellbeing

and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION:

DR. HILARY LEIGHTON [signature on file]

DR. VIRGINIA MCKENDRY [signature on file]

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of  
the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and  
recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

DR. HILARY LEIGHTON [signature on file]

### **Abstract**

This autophenomenographic study was formed at the confluence of diverse sources: existing literature and poetry, and subjective being-in-the-world experiences of sitting, listening, and learning from the wisdom of Mission Creek, “speaking”. I explored how this kind of embodied inquiry might shape me as a burgeoning environmental educator and communicator synthesizing these knowledge streams to create my own new wellness narrative larger than any one source could convey. As I gathered ‘warm’ subjective data from my mind-body, I recognized the implications of myself in this research as a concomitant cell within the body of the Earth. Delving into theories and insights gleaned from studying water intelligence, exploring my own ecological identity in relationship to river, and experiencing nature-as-medicine through place-responsive sitting practice at the river, I explore the ebbs and flows of these relationships with (and for) the world, toward a greater understanding of how wellbeing might be expressed and lived.

*Keywords: wellbeing, water, ecological identity, embodied inquiry, lived experience, autophenomenography, place-responsiveness, nature-as-medicine*

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Thank you *N'wha-kwi-sen*, Creek of Smoothing Stones, for evolving and expanding my perceptions of the mysterious and transformational currents of life

“You cannot step into the same river twice”

and to honour

“The river where you set your foot just now is gone—those waters giving way to this, now this.”

Heraclitus’ words spoken around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Hatton, 2001, p. 27)

With a full and grateful heart for life’s waves, ripples, trickles, stillness, and flow,

my family for reflecting the many faces of love and encouraging me to go deeper and deeper still,

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and my body within this body of the ensouled world...oh, the beauty of being!

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## Introduction

Beyond the tangible realm, water emerges within this research as both a metaphor and an abiding source of profundity. Its essence flows through our very beings, yet it also symbolizes the unconscious depths of our psyches. Water sustains all life.

I hoped to explore and weave wholistic research using various qualitative methods to investigate wellbeing, water, and ecological identity (Abram, 1996/2017; Naess, 2005; Strang, 2020) through place responsiveness and lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; van Manen, 2016; White, 2013) and the practice of place bonding (Abram, 1996/2017; Leighton, 2020; Strang, 2020). In addition, I studied other perspectives that do not ignore or encumber the body (both Earth's body and *our* animal bodies) (Abram, 2010; Blackie, 2016; Clinebell, 2013; Ensler, 2013). Taking up embodied writing (Anderson, 2001) through writing inquiry (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) as an autophenomenographic study (White, 2013), I sat, listened, wrote, and reflected as a methodology, allowing many *perception-feeling-thought*-threads to be woven together to discover and manifest a form of new meaning-making. It was my further hope that these inquiries and experiences would help shape and (in)form a more embodied and fluid understanding of my own relationships within the world (including a sense of wellbeing and maturation) and make apparent the ways I might share what I find.

Before delving in deeper, I want to provide some personal context in this subjective study of why me and why now. I have always loved the water. I was born in June, and within weeks, according to family lore, my parents were dunking me in the water. Water has always been part of my life's context from being on swim teams, to running through creeks, to taking deep water ocean swims. Born of Scandinavian and English ancestry, my life's journey has unfolded against



the breathtaking backdrop of British Columbia, where the majestic Pacific Ocean, lofty Ponderosa pines, and wild creeks, rivers, and lakes whisper tales of wonder.

Raised by two visionary educators, I imbibe the core values of love of self, others, and the planet, aware of the privileges adorning my path. I acknowledge that some privileges in my life have resulted from factors beyond my control, such as my family's health (both physical and emotional), where I was born, and the economic status of my parents. However, there are other privileges that I had to work hard to develop and nurture, like embracing the opportunities that my environment provided and making choices that would benefit the community at large. As a white woman living in a progressive and inclusive country that values diversity, I recognize that my fair skin has protected me from experiencing some of the racial tensions present in our society. Additionally, I am grateful for my supportive family, who have instilled in me a belief in my potential and belonging in this world. As I grew up, I was intentional about where I focused my work energy, which led to stable employment opportunities. In my late twenties, I found a nurturing partner who met the depths of relationality I had been waiting years for. Today, my work as an environmental communications consultant opens fresh opportunities to express myself creatively if I take the risk and apply myself.

With this in mind, and with the aim to conduct authentic research, I crave deeper communion with water, where the wisdom of nature flows and, if we care to listen, often imparts lessons of reconnection and remembrance. Through reverent engagement, observation, and contemplation, I sought to tap into the inherent healing qualities of the natural world (especially water), intertwining my destiny with its sacred rhythms.

When writing about nature, I have wrestled with whether to capitalize the word nature. Nevertheless, I feel there is a form of distancing assigned to a capital “N” that feels like a barrier between myself and the natural world. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, as I see myself in nature and as nature, nature will be written with a small “n” to reflect a reciprocal relationship.

### **Natural Relationships**

I have come to understand that my relationship with Mission Creek and its environs has kept me well over the years, and along with the lands which have helped raise me, these themes are vital components of my essence, my ecological identity. This is why I am delving into research that integrates an examination of water, wellbeing, and sense of self.

Strangely, I can feel rooted *in place* even when walking within Mission Creek Regional Park. Perhaps this feeling-sense I experience is the bond I share with the natural world? As Kimmerer (2013) says, “when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street to a sacred bond” (p. 125). By walking, sitting, and just showing up, I become more rooted, more intimate, with this place (Blackie, 2016; Hogan, 2007; Nepo, 2018; Noble et al., 2021; Peltier, 2022; Zhao, 2006). Not least of all, I feel immensely at home here, with a desire and hope to return the sacred gifts water gives me through this study.

Mission Creek Regional Park was originally named *N’wha-kwi-sen*, meaning “smoothing stones” (Okanagan Historical Society, 1948, p. 212), and has been celebrated for time immemorial by Syilx Okanagan People. If exploring the park in Autumn, you might find yourself, like me, encountering a bear—a multidimensional being, that reminds me of this land’s inhabitants and its wild spirit (Armstrong, 1995). You may smell spearmint, a natural medicine,

or see Kokanee salmon offering nourishment to the surrounding ecosystem and simultaneously regenerating its species. There is also an abundance of granite rocks throughout the park.

Ecologist Stephen Harding (2006) writes, “rocks...the elders of the Earth...the keepers of the oldest memories...are sought out for their tranquil, wise counsel” (p. 20). To me, these granite rocks are indeed my sage counsellors with their geology of ancient memory, hence my desire to sit with them. This feels something like wellness to me, so I am going to sit by the river with the rocks and land and listen to these teachers for a long time; this feeds my desire to know this place more deeply, and to write about, and share this experience within these pages.

### **A Healthy Approach**

Throughout this research, I have many questions about wellbeing—starting with my own wellbeing as someone who shares in the human experience of *suffering*: what Tibetan-Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön (2017) defines as egoic clinging to ideas, scripts, and certainty, rather than embracing complexity, change, nuances, and mystery. There is something more than just our physical health going on here: you can go to the doctor and receive a bad health report, yet you can still feel ‘well’. I recognize wellbeing is a loaded term. Wellbeing can be multilayered. Wellbeing can encompass notions of health, sickness, suffering in the contexts of the emotional, physical, spiritual, ecological, and space and time realms. It can also relate to ancestral healing and much more. To embrace this complexity, I believed I might learn a lot from the nature of the river. I hoped to learn how to find ways to sense and flow more with the natural rhythms of life, take up a more embodied way of being, well.

## **Ecological Self**

Finally, another significant theme that has arisen, in complement to my inquiry of water, and wellbeing is ecological identity (Naess, 2005). I hoped that an attunement practice of sitting with the more-than-human world would help me flesh out more of my identity as a part of world's body (Thomashow, 1995), discovering what aspect or "ecological niche" (Plotkin, 2021, p. 6) of Earth's body I am called to embody and fulfill. In correspondence, my explorations delved into *wellbeing* as I became a kind of apprentice to water and land (Abram, 1996/2017; Leighton, 2020; Plotkin, 2003), as I showed up, paid attention, and listened in to learn at the flow of life, death, and liminal spaces (Strang, 2020; Weber, 2016) made evident by Mission Creek's ecosystem.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions orient this research toward an emerging horizon of understanding for me. These questions take the form of quandaries and were borne of my own experiences, tensions, struggles, and a deep longing for a more authentic (wild) essence of being and *belonging-in-the-world* (for example, more of my true nature) as expressed through lived experience (van Manen, 2016) and embodied writing (Anderson, 2001).

1. What does water know, and what can water teach me about my own suffering and wellbeing?
  - a. How might my apprenticeship with water allow a deepening of my ecological identity and sense of belonging to emerge?
  - b. How might water teach me to embody more of my own wild innate river-like nature?

2. How might this lived experience of building a more intimate relationship with water assist me in assisting others as an environmental communicator and educator?

### **Literature Review**

The various yet related themes arising from these questions help to organize my early thinking and inspire me to uncover other authors who have embraced wildness and wellbeing in contemporary culture and literature (Blackie, 2016; Ensler, 2013; Leighton, 2014; Macy, 2021; Strang, 2020; Snyder, 1990/2020; Weber, 2016).

Throughout my thesis, to help clarify my perspectives and quench my thirst for the love of words, I dug deeper into the etymological meanings of words to discover and illuminate some forgotten root truths, secreted in the language itself. These insights surface throughout my work.

Other novel and embodied perspectives I explored that pertain to environmental education and communication included: Abram's (1996/2017) sensuous phenomenological writing highlighting how one might reestablish a more reciprocal and respectful relationship with the world; Bachelard's (1983) and Plotkin's (2010) psychological works regarding unconsciousness, imagination, and water metaphors; Strang's (2020) extensive research on water's meaning; and, Weber's noticings on wonder (2016) and enlivenment (2019). Water is referred to both literally through exploring its ecological significance (Strang, 2020) and metaphorically through my ecological identity: by tapping into a "more mature form" of "authenticity and self-acceptance" so I may contribute more of my inner wisdom by mirroring a wellspring of interconnectedness (Plotkin, 2010, p. 311). These authors all emphasize the importance of understanding and honouring creativity, inherent agency, and life's constantly evolving and unfolding adaptability—the vital interconnectedness requisite for regenerative relationships. I have attempted to explicate this further in the literature review section below.

The following section begins to define concepts such as: ecological identity, water, wildness, and wellbeing. I imagined I would be expanding these themes as I noticed and responded to what emerged and evolved from my own lived experiences with the river.

### **Ecological Perspectives on Selfhood**

From a lived experience perspective (van Manen, 2016), I will begin by defining *ecological perspectives on selfhood* as reclaiming the innate attributes within that, from one perspective, resist suppression from current cultural and societal norms, and from another, fan the flames of innate potential and interdependence. These perspectives include looking into ecological identity as true nature, through the lens of ecopsychology and practices of place bonding and place responsiveness.

### ***Ecological Identity as True Nature***

Norwegian philosopher and originator of the term “deep ecology” Arne Naess (2005) viewed ecological identity as a conscious act of self-realization where ensouled connections extend from our individual selves to the natural world ‘Self’, and where we move beyond the narrowness of living solely from an ego perspective toward an ecocentric existence. He went on to say, “through the wider Self every living being is intimately connected, and from this intimacy follows the capacity of identification and, as a natural consequence, the practice of nonviolence...belief in the essential oneness of all life” (p. 524). Naess’s enormous contribution in terms of the self as a permeable and deeply interconnected and interwoven being with other life fed my notions of ecological identity and buoyed my experiences with the water.

Naess’s interpretation of ecological identity shares similar threads with many First Nations communities and nature-rooted cultures, as seen in Okanagan Syilx Indigenous

philosopher and ecofeminist Jeannette Armstrong's (1995; 1996; 2006) work firmly based in Okanagan Indigenous traditional knowledge. The idea of ecological identity is expanded upon through Armstrong's words when she defines herself/her identity as derived of "the mountains, and by birth, [where] the river is my responsibility: they are part of me. I cannot be separated from my place or my land" (1996, p. 461). Armstrong (1995; 2006) provides linguistic and archeological insights that explore the intergenerational alchemy of phenomenology, ecofeminism, and Indigenous wisdom from past, present, and future beings from Okanagan lands. Employing writing, archetypes, and storytelling to make greater sense of the complex ways in which we communicate about and *with* the environment, Armstrong (1995; 2006) highlights how Okanagan community members are—or are not—bonding their whole individual selves and communal selves to the land through discerning metaphysical, sociological, and environmental meanings that also correspond to the field of ecopsychology.

### ***Ecopsychology***

The foundational domain upon which this research establishes its roots is ecopsychology. An ecopsychological worldview contrasts current problematic "patriarchal social structures and hierarchies" (Hibbard, 2003, p. 26) that prevail in a dominant progressive culture where humans seem to place a higher value on themselves than the waters for instance which make all life on Earth possible. Within ecopsychology, humans are seen as nature, inseparable from "the natural environment out of which we evolve" which in turn, redefines human wellbeing within an ecological context (Brown, 1995, p. xvi). This concept is central because ecopsychology speaks to the individual's ability to recognize themselves as part of the whole, which is expressly linked to our ability to integrate with the environmental world, effectively dissolving dualistic notions



of a dominant culture. The axiom of ecopsychology, “what we do to the one, we do to the other;” invites a profoundly reciprocal way of being and thinking (H. Leighton, personal communication, August 25, 2023).

Ecopsychology aims to dissolve black-or-white thinking and divisiveness between humans and the more-than-human world, sometimes through complex and multifaceted soul-to-soul relationships. An example of this is my own relationships and connections with natural elements such as rock (which I view as one of my elders), which forms part of the space where I sit near the creek. Stephan Harding (2006) exemplifies his own relationship with muntjac (deer) when writing of his personally significant, soul-to-soul experiences with them in Rushbed Wood, Buckinghamshire, UK. I resonate with Harding when he writes, “We are living through a world-wide crisis of our own making” (2006, p. 19), and he implores “that we urgently need to make peace with nature by rediscovering and embodying a world-view that connects us with a deep sense of participating in a cosmos suffused with intelligence, beauty, intrinsic value and profound meaning” (p. 19). He discovered this firsthand in his relationship with the muntjac when their eyes met during field studies, and something happened that deeply moved him. This way of knowing suggests that at this depth of connectivity and intimacy, the soul can no longer be viewed as an individual prospect; in this communion state, we realize we co-exist within a world *ensouled* (Hillman, 1989). Following this, Buddhist teacher and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh (1993) identifies the human self as an interdependent “interbeing endlessly interwoven” (p. 129) with the rest of life because we are all made of the same star-stuff, the same Earth elements, and patterns. Naess (2005) extends this deep connectivity to “...all living beings: beautiful or ugly,

big or small, scientific or not” (p. 515) no matter how different we might seem at first glance to one another.

By its very etymology, ecopsychology borrows its prefix “eco” from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “home” or, in this case, “world”, “psyche” translates from Greek to mean butterfly, breath, and soul (the latter I will take up for the purposes of this argument) and lastly, “logos” means ‘to study or to know’. Therefore, one could say, ecopsychology might be best understood as a form of *world-soul-knowing* (H. Leighton, personal communication, August 25, 2023). On deeper exploration, going back to the fifth century BCE, Looz (2021) notes,

“*Logos* was first used in a cosmological way by Heraclitus...to articulate a kind of intelligent life force embedded in and interconnecting all things, ‘a divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning’...*Logos* also held an explicit sense that everything in nature is full of some kind of divine indwelling, worthy of reverence...*Logos* is about the divine relationship between all things. The system of their connection: conversation” (p. 106-108).

Ecopsychological thought acknowledges that we live *within* psyche, within an ensouled world (Abram, 1996/2017; Armstrong, 1995; Hillman, 1989; Leighton, 2020; Plotkin, 2003) within which we humans are an integral, inseparable part, and where everything is connected, alive, and sentient. Hillman (1995) radically states, “the greater part of the soul lies outside of the body”, and “the deeper self cannot be confined to ‘in here’ because we cannot be sure it is not also or entirely ‘out there’” (p. xix). Hillman’s ideas intermingle well with Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1993) essay, *The Sun My Heart*, where he explicates his notions of *interbeing* (non-living-being elements coming together to create living beings), the impermanence of life, and that vast ‘heart’

beyond our body, ‘the sun’ and share with all of life. All of this provided me with some scholarly underpinnings to uphold and serve the soul-to-soul conversations I desired to have with the creek.

In resonance and alignment with Indigenous traditions, ecopsychology explores how an individual’s relationship with their deep self requires attunement with the cosmos. This kind of spacious understanding is exemplified by what Indigenous Hawaiian Educator and Researcher Manulani Meyer (2013) writes about in the article, *Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense*, when noting, “everything is alive and we are all relatives” (p. 100). *Anima mundi*, Greek for “world soul” (Harding, 2006; Hillman, 1989), specifically links to what Indigenous communities have known and been embodying for millennia: the interdependence of all life and all living beings as animated, soulful, and alive. Considering my objectives to attempt to experience and deepen my understanding of Self and world and Self as world, then finding and following a deep structure such as ecopsychology, meant engendering an ethic of radical reciprocity at every turn in this research.

### ***Place Bonding and Place Responsiveness***

One wild practice that invites and encourages many of the elements critical to this research, is *place bonding*. Place bonding is a unique approach to glimpsing the ineffable essence of another being or place through bonding (Armstrong, 1996; Leighton, 2020). While it is one of my chosen methods for data gathering, place bonding deserves some attention here in the literature too.

Place bonding, as Leighton (2020) notes, is a form of “nature immersion” where “students *descend* onto the land embedding themselves, being-in-the-world in a wild embrace of

place and person. Simultaneously, they also move down *into* themselves to take on a more embodied essence” (p. 199). It begins by being drawn toward a place that calls to you, and even before sitting, asking permission to do so and to get to know that place and its inhabitants. One must “listen” for a response to the question of “May I?” before embarking on the bonding process. As strange as that can sound, a kind of interior knowing can ensue allowing a sense of whether there is a “yes” or a “no”. Is this space inviting me or not? If not, one must move on. If yes, then this practice requires that an individual spend time in this same place at regular intervals in various weather, daylight, or lack thereof, seasons, or other factors getting to know it well (Leighton, 2020). Engaging with the natural world by sitting, listening, and noticing, journaling, moving my body to express the feelings arising in the moment, this practice can often help to cultivate a more soul-to-soul sense of being-in and *with* the world: it can assist in staying in the ensouled present (H. Leighton, personal communication, August 25, 2023). This practice also offered fresh insights that often foster rejuvenating perspectives and allowed me to see more deeply *into* world, rather than just looking at it or skimming the surface.

Strang (2020) defines place bonding as the emotional attachment people and communities develop towards a specific location, influencing their experiences and sense of belonging. Place responsiveness can be part of the alchemy of place bonding, as it refers to the quality of how someone might engage with and respond to their environment. For instance, water can play a significant role in shaping cultural and physical landscapes, conjuring sensory experiences, and being integrated into cultural rituals and practices that reinforce connections to a place (Macy & Brown, 2014; Strang, 2020). Hence, place bonding with the river has the potential to cultivate a sense of belonging through emotional attachments to a place while place

responsiveness is the *action* of this bond, encompassing the activation of sensory experiences I take in, receive, and respond to in a form of conversational reciprocity.

Place bonding and responsiveness have a meaningful relationship in Okanagan Indigenous traditions too. Armstrong (1996) writes about how bonding is an embodied form of relationship: the land teaches us, and language becomes incarnate as the Okanagan People “refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable...the flesh that is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things that the land is” (p. 465). Our flesh is made up of the water, flora, fungi, fauna, and other life forms—the same elements found in the ecosystems in which we live and receive nourishment. Therefore, if we are disconnected and not aware of the significance of land and place, we can become “dis-placed” (Armstrong, 1996, p. 466) and essentially, disembodied. For the purposes of this research, place responsiveness and place bonding may be used interchangeably.

## **Water**

Water can represent the dreamy depths of the unconscious psyche and deep imagination where creativity, vision, (and some believe) our innate gifts are born (Bachelard, 1983; Hillman, 1989; Plotkin, 2010). It is also tied to our human birth from our mother’s watery womb and, in Traditional Chinese Medicine, water represents life force and life-giving beauty, called “Qi” (Kaptchuk, 2000; Zhao, 2006). Water is, to me, a site of endless wonder and curiosity that evokes notions of wildness and when I am near to large and moving bodies of water, a sense of wellbeing.

The authors who see water as a symbol of the unconscious provide us with a metaphor for self-reflection, introspection, and deepening exploration of our inner selves that allows

aspects of the psyche to surface which can facilitate further self-discovery and growth. It follows then, that by immersing emotionally and physically in water environments, we can also gain knowledge and insights that expand beyond what is obtained through only intellectual study (Strang, 2020). Through synaesthetic experiences (which means that all our senses are being used to experience or be in relationship, in this case, with the water), our sensual experiences change us in some way. Strang (2019) writes,

Water flows through and connects every scale of health and, because we ‘think with water’, we conceptualize these flows in both material and non-material terms. Water connects not only micro and macro physical systems but also allows us to imagine—both positive and negative—flows of matter, as well as ideas, knowledge and the spirit, over multiple spatialities and temporalities. (p. 21)

There is what the poet David Whyte (The On Being Project, 2019) calls, “the conversational nature of reality” (4:18) that can occur where one is changed by virtue of their relationship with the natural world. By exploring and giving primacy to sensing and feeling before thought can arrive, it may be possible to develop a more holistic and embodied understanding of water’s significance in our lives (Abram, 1996/2017; Strang, 2020)—but this takes practice.

There is much current research on cold water submersion and physical and psychological wellbeing too (Harper, 2022; Huberman, 2023; Strang, 2019; Tsui, 2020), demonstrating how humans can move beyond conceptual frameworks and intellectual constructs, where we can appreciate water in fresh sensory and experiential ways. Cold water immersion can also heighten awareness and potentially it “creates a euphoric sense” of wellbeing (Harper, 2022, p. 69). While this study is situated at the intersection of the psychological and the spiritual aspects of

wellbeing, cold water practices appear more akin to exercise and less concerned with an intimate relationship of getting to know and listen to water and engage in the reflective praxis that follows place bonding, for example.

### ***Psychological Perspectives***

Correlating these themes of water and wellbeing into practice, eco-depth-psychologist Bill Plotkin's (2010) writing on initiated adulthood as "a wellspring" (p. 303) adds further insight into what might comprise the qualities of a mature, natural person. Plotkin notes that our deeper life is like a wellspring with an invisible and unconscious source, galvanizing our endeavors, captivating our imagination, and rippling into our palpable existence. When humans access this wild wellspring within, he offers that they can experience abundant health, wholeness (Plotkin, 2010), and, Strang (2019) adds, wellbeing.

Our unconscious can be thought of as water we are swimming in, where there is a continual invitation to explore deeper depths, and therefore more complexity, compared to what is found at surface levels (Bachelard, 1983; Hillman, 1989; Plotkin, 2010). Jungian therapist and author James Hollis (1996) describes working with soul in his book *Swamplands of the Soul: New Life in Dismal Places*. Hollis argues that it is the difficulties in our life—the compulsions, the anxieties, and the depressions—that mold us and create meaning. However, we need to look beneath these symptoms, he says, and feel the feelings that are being covered. Hollis (as cited in McCurry, 2013) explains, "Without the suffering, which seems to be the...requisite for psychological and spiritual maturation, one would remain unconscious, infantile and dependent.

Yet many of our addictions, ideological attachments and neuroses are flights from suffering” (para. 7). What a wild thought that to embrace suffering allows us to grow in deeper consciousness.

Also relating to the wild within, Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola-Estés (1997) outlines how humans are perceivers and teachers, and she correlates this in terms of women with water. When I think of *wild* in relation to water, Pinkola-Estés’ thoughts on wildness, freedom, creativity, and a clear river come to mind: “Be wild; that is how to clear the river...If we want to allow it its freedom, we have to allow our ideational lives to be let loose, to stream, letting anything come, initially censoring nothing...Then the river will flow...” (1997, p. 316-317). Here Pinkola-Estés is using the river as a metaphor to symbolize the dynamic, intuitive, transformative, and cyclical aspects of a woman’s life journey, inviting women to connect with their inner selves and embrace the potential of their ever-flowing intuition for personal growth.

Regarding deep unconscious imagination, Bachelard, Hillman, Hollis, and Plotkin are just a few scholar-philosophers who dove into this topic and found meaningful insights. First, Bachelard’s (1983) writing reflects on how imagination shapes our perception of space. Thus, his work encourages the exploration of inner landscapes to expand self-awareness. Second, Hillman (1989) emphasizes the significance of dreams and images, which represent the active intelligence of the psyche. Hillman advocates that we engage with the unconscious symbols and, through employing imagination, let the images guide the soul’s quest for meaning. Third, Hollis (1996) also focuses on attending to unconscious messages like dreams and shadows, viewing them as integral components of psychological wholeness. Lastly, Plotkin (2010) highlights the deep connection between the unconscious and the natural world. Through founding *Animas Valley*



*Institute*, Plotkin has participated in and guided decades of wilderness soul initiation for human development and psychological growth by tapping into the wellspring—the intersection of psyche and nature—within the realm of true adulthood.

### ***Indigenous Perspectives***

Water is critical to Indigenous perspectives and being. For Syilx Okanagan People who called these lands home long before I did, water or siwłk<sup>w</sup> is “our most sacred medicine: siwłk<sup>w</sup> nourishes, replenishes, cleanses, and heals” (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021, p. 14). Buddhist systems thinker Joanna Macy calls this deep identification: I am water, I have water nature.

Waters need love and care to heal, just as humans do. In many traditional contexts, water is life’s primary source: it is considered the soul of the people, the lifeblood of culture acting as teacher and medicine (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021; Peltier, 2022; Strang, 2019). For example, Strang (2019) writes how, “In Dorset, a similar combination of material and moral concerns can be seen in local ideas about the ecological wellbeing of the river” (p. 28). Expanding on this idea of a river’s wellbeing, David Boyd’s (2017) book *Rights of Nature* tells of the Māori worldview and how New Zealand accepted this Indigenous culture’s legal recognition of the Whanganui River as a person. “Finalized in 2014, this agreement recognizes the holistic Māori concept of Te Awa Tupua, referring to the indivisible whole of the Whanganui River, including all of its physical and metaphysical elements and extending from the mountains to the sea” (Boyd, 2017, p. 138). This river is seen as a prestigious ancestor and the protective spiritual living force that represents the tribe. Thus, Whanganui River’s wellbeing and health is directly linked with the wellbeing and health of the Māori. I live in Canada, and in 2021, the Magpie River “was granted legal personhood to protect its pristine waters” (Benner, 2024, para.

4). The Māori have a “deeply engrained...saying *ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au* [I am the river, and the river is me]” (Boyd, 2017, p. 134). As more areas grant legal recognition of rivers as persons, I wonder what shifts within individuals and the world if we live like we are the river, and the river is us.

According to Armstrong (1995), the Okanagan waters and land teach that in our individual (bounded) selves, we are tiny and unknowledgeable; it is the whole-Earth (ecological) part of us that holds immense wisdom and wellbeing. This concept pairs with Naess’ (2005) work regarding ecological identity, where shifts in consciousness can occur when we go beyond the constrictive egoic parts of ourselves and identify as a larger Self as world. “Through the wider Self every living being is intimately connected, and from this intimacy follows the capacity of *identification* and, as a natural consequence, the practice of non-violence” (Naess, 2005, p. 233). Naess (2005) goes on to write, “And the more one’s nature and potentialities are realized, the more self-realization there is” (p. 238). Thus, world can be viewed as our relative rather than a resource (Kimmerer, 2013).

When thinking about water, I think of the intimate relationship we all have with this life force, as stated by Armstrong: “We came into this world through water, we were carried to life in water, when we were born that water returned to the earth to continue to give life” (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021, p. 3). By sitting with and walking alongside Mission Creek, I wished to explore what Potawatomi Citizen Nation member and SUNY biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) and many others speak of: that women are the ones who are closest to and tend to the water and in many First Nations cultures are considered keepers of the waters (Dennis & Bell, 2020; Peltier, 2022; Zhao, 2006). As water sustains all life and is sacred through and through

(Peltier, 2022; Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021; Strang, 2020), it goes deeper still in what Anishinabek Nation's Chief Water Commissioner Autumn Peltier (2022) says when explaining, "We can't live in our mother's womb without water...The sacred significance is that my mother comes from her mother's water, my grandmother comes from her mother's water, and my great grandmother comes from her mother's water..." (18:50). Peltier (2022) also recalls words from her late great-aunt Josephine, a mentor, water protector, and former Anishinabek Nation Chief Water Commissioner: "Pray for the water because the water doesn't have a voice; you're speaking up for it" (20:03).

If water is sacred to life, so too is breath. Water (blood/women) and breathe (air/men) are an example of what Seneca scholar Barbara Alice Mann (2022) calls "complementary duality" within a "kinship worldview" (p. 137). In Indigenous traditions, Mann writes about how blood relates to:

...menstruation, conception, Successful Childbirth! Blood is creativity, and creativity is life which is forcefully expressed by women through their twinned ability to bleed without dying and to pull new life from their wombs...Blood goes beyond the simplistic Western definition of physical lineage, and deeply into the realm of cosmic potency. (p. 137)

Mann notes that, if men were to bleed, that would be destructive and could lead to injury or death. In this way, "Blood's creativity belongs exclusively to women" (pp. 137-138). For men, being connected with breath and air does not mean "air quality, ozone, EMPHYSEMA" as Westerners may think (Mann, 2022, p. 138). Instead, Indigenous traditions "think, wind, wings, SPEECH. If women work from watery caves up to level, then men work from airy heights down

to level...the reason that chants and blowing medicine are always male-practiced, at least in traditional circles” (p. 138). Men “set up physical vibrations in the air, a medicine” while women bleed and birth, yet “either blood or breath is capable of injuring the cosmos if used without balance” (pp. 137-138). Life insists on this intimate and great complimentary duality as we need both water and air—the essence of all life. Intuitively I have always known that my connection with water was also tied to ancient feminine archetypal identity, which could be construed as the oldest myth stories we can tell.

### *Sacred Traditions*

Along with delving into Indigenous traditions relating to water (Dennis & Bell, 2020; McGregor, 2015; Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021; Peltier, 2022), I am also keen to explore water intelligence (Emoto, 2011; Nepo, 2018; Strang, 2020) and explore water in the Taoist traditions (Kaptchuk, 2000; LaChapelle, 1989; Snyder, 1990/2020; Zhao, 2006). With origins dating back to 200 BCE, Taoism offers unique insights into water’s voice, meaning, and significance through art, poetry, metaphor, ancient scripts, unconsciousness (Kaptchuk, 2000), and the wild within and around us.

Fluid connectivity exist between the principles of Taoism and the wild within each of us, highlighting obstacles to the flow of energy and subsequent disharmony that stems from socio-cultural contexts that are eventually made known in the body through blockages and interruptions (Kaphuck, 2000; LaChapelle, 1989; Zhao, 2006). Just as in the ecopsychological adage, “what we do to one, we do to the other” (H. Leighton, personal communication, August 25, 2023), in the overarching principles of Taoism, sickness in our bodies equates to sickness in the world, and vice versa (Kaphuck, 2000; Zhao, 2006). When working with Taoist principles

and Traditional Chinese Medicine in the body, one can sense areas lacking flow within and outside the body *and* in correspondence with cultural landscapes. A heartbreaking example within a socio-cultural context is where attributes associated with feminism such as caring, connectivity, affection, emotionality, and compassion (Ensler, 2013; Zhao, 2006) risk becoming muted by the cultural norms and efficiencies of modernity. In effect, the damming of the flow of these attributes can create unhealthy conditions in the world's body (Ensler, 2013; Strand, 2022) and in our own bodies (Zhao, 2006). Sacred traditional teachings help to explore water as a metaphor for unconsciousness, emotionality, health, and wholeness through a continued flow of energy.

### **Wellbeing and Nature**

In terms of wellbeing, I wanted to look more deeply into the intuitive and transformative ways we are inseparable from an ensouled watery world particularly because, "Treatment of the inner requires attention to the outer" (Hillman, 1995, p. xxi). Specifically, I wished to discover connection points where mystical, non-ordinary experiences could be found in the everyday (Abram, 1996; Hillman, 1989)—those moments of being where one can see without the dualistic barrier (Mann, 2022) and more purely perceive "other." I also explored how nature can become medicine via insights from Chinese medicine traditions that view one's inner environment in relation to the outer environment (Kaptchuk, 2000; Zhao, 2006).

My working definition of *wellbeing* held wholeness nuances that included various components of "wild living" (Pinkola-Estés, 1997), or as Strand (2022) writes, "affirms the holarchic nature of reality: we are matryoshka dolls of being, simultaneously composed of worlds and constituting larger worlds, systems that can be understood only in their connective

plurality, rather than when broken down to parts” (p. 6). Pinkola-Estés’ (1997) and Blackie’s (2016) writings regarding wildness, and Strand’s (2022) noticings of the holarchic systemic nature of the world (i.e., all attributes whether they be the wild masculine, the wild feminine, or expressions across the spectrum, are many parts within wholes eventually making up one whole) served as a starting point for me to explore wellbeing. I studied this in the context of nature as a female person seeking the restored balance within myself (myself as research instrument) as I align with unlimited expressions of life force (river, rock, etc.) to deepen my relationship with the natural world and take ““tinctures”” of nature-medicine through place bonding.

### *Nature as Medicine*

While much can be learned about wellbeing from being in nature, how nature threads through Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), for instance, is another way to experience health through a relationship with nature by adopting natural principles and plant teachings. TCM celebrates and honours the stages of a woman’s life, for example, in ways some people may find healing: “Menstruation is referred to as Heavenly Water, pregnancy is called Ripening the Fruit, postpartum is known as Golden Month, and menopause is called Second Spring” (Zhao, 2006, p. x). Semantics are significant here. Reading this for the first time my body felt much more expansive, light, and free when talking about “Heavenly Water” rather than “my time of the month,” and conjured up meaningful visuals and spacious sensations rather than confining or demeaning labels. TCM provided practical guidance for nature to be both teacher and medicine, offering new portals into wellbeing and shifting perceptions to more embodied ways of being healthy and enlivened.

In this research, I took tinctures myself through the practice of place bonding and had the opportunity to further expand on nature as medicine within these pages. This area of my research delved into how receiving the natural world as teacher and medicine via a local creek ecosystem offered lessons of reconnection and remembering (Leighton, 2020; Strang, 2020) as I practiced sitting, attending, and critically reflecting on my own sense of wellness (which I at first viewed as an outcome, whereas now I consider wellbeing as an ongoing way of being).

### **Wildness**

Along with wellbeing the idea of *wildness* surfaced in my study. Early thinking about this notion led me to ideas of living a natural life with integrity, honouring uniqueness, and interdependence from my time with the creek. Abram (2010) offers that our very heartbeat “is wild” (2:47) and is “not out of control, but...out of *our* control” (2:36). Therefore, even when we are seated, be it in front of computer screens or on a mountain’s edge, we are wild. The wildness that exists within and around us “permeates us” (Abram, 2010, 3:35), and it is also present at our core. Wildness is an essential part of life; it requires a literal place and context for vitality to exist (Armstrong, 1995). Various definitions of “wild” are explored in this section.

According to Armstrong (1995), *wild* means learning our place as “land pieces” (p. 324) and Snyder (1990/2020) writes about wild as the free, “self-organizing,” “self-authenticating,” simple yet multifaceted real world we belong to (p. 11). I drew more heavily on Buddhist Gary Snyder’s (1990/2020) expanded definition of *wildness*, which encompasses enlightenment, self-realization, and communication, where wildness bonds the out-of-our-control processes of the universe, language, place, and communication with “the wild in ourselves” (p. xxix). Snyder’s definition pairs well with Abram’s (1996/2017) notions of *more-than-human*, or what Snyder

(1990/2020) calls *other-than-human*. They are referring to co-dwellers of Earth that include and surpass human societies and range from the unseen and spiritual from the cosmos to weather patterns to animals to iron housed in Earth's core to "the physical universe and all its properties" that make up (all) nature and are wild (Snyder, 1990/2020, p. 9). Resonating with this line of thinking, Armstrong (1995) notes, "The Okanagan teaches that emotion or feeling is the capacity whereby community and land intersect in our beings and become part of us." (p. 321), lending a kind of wondrous unification with surroundings and others, where to this land-based people, the wild bond is a place of interchange for wellbeing and wholeness.

Weber's (2016) work on enlivenment and wonder confluences well with that of Abram (1996/2017), Armstrong (1995), and Snyder (1990/2020). In his view, all living beings possess an inherent wildness—a capacity for aliveness, enlivenment, spontaneity, unpredictability, and autonomy through their actions and interactions. Weber has found intriguing ways to communicate *enlivenment* (2019) (the continuous ways living beings exist and engage in dynamic relationships with their environments and the co-creation of life) and *aliveness*, which encompasses the capacity for sensing, feeling, and perceiving the world while acknowledging the unique experience each organism has of being alive (Weber, 2016). These authors invite an embrace of a deep sense of wonder and reverence for the living world, recognizing all living beings' intrinsic value and dignity while celebrating the wildness present in nature.

One other meaning of *wild* borrowed from Clarissa Pinkola-Estés' (1997) writings of the "wild woman archetype" (p. 2), that Clinebell (2013) notes is "a woman who has claimed her wild inner female strength and is using it to live creatively and courageously" (p. 30). Pinkola-Estés (1997) defines *wild* as "not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of control, but



in its original sense, which means to live a natural life, one in which the criatura, creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries” (p. 6). This sounds to me a lot like wellbeing. When I am connecting with the natural world, blockages within seem to dissipate and I sense myself moving into more wholesome river-like nature. In my creaturely nature, when untethered and flowing, this feels like *well-being*, drawing from the wellspring.

### ***Mythical Perspectives***

Counter to more contemporary notions of a myth as an untruth (as in “the urban myth”), mythical perspectives are concerned with learning through cultural artifacts and stories that speak of a greater, authentic, societal truth of older wisdom that has become known over time and passed down through oral culture and story (Leighton, 2014) but are “not simple, neat or painless” (Shaw, n.d., para. 2). Both Pinkola-Estés (1997) and Celtic mythologist Sharon Blackie (2016) write in consciousness-shifting ways, teaching readers through myth stories, how we can learn, for instance, about the wild feminine from a cultural, spiritual, scholarly, personal, and artistic perspective.

A reconsideration of the value placed on legends, faerie, and folktales as meaning-bearing cultural artifacts and in this case, for environmental education, while rediscovering the richness of narrative folklore, themes of knowledge acquisition, and the universal meanings for the present-day person, is worthy of inclusion in this study. Clarissa Pinkola-Estés’ interpretations and vision of the female self for example from *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1997) takes an in-depth look into feminine archetypes for literary, cultural, and psychological analysis. In her examination of stories that focus on intuition, initiation, and instincts to elicit the wild woman archetype, there is revealed

an essential knowledge to women becoming mature creatures as outlined in her reflections on fairy tales, individuation, and analysis of the wild feminine (Popławska, 2018). In this way, myths can stand as symbols that assist people in communicating complex ideas. As I communicate learnings from my relationship with place and river, taking a more mythic perspective helped me realize what mythologist Martin Shaw (n.d.) teaches—that in the greater sense, we are perhaps already living these stories but might be unaware; and in the process, myth stories helped to clarify and connect my findings to a larger story than merely my own.

### **Summary**

By discerning the ways in which nature is medicine, I wondered how I might experience wellbeing differently as this research unfolded through place bonding practice and further embodied writing inquiry. If “waters encountered on the journeys are recognized as living entities imbued with both the power to heal and the need to be healed” (McGregor, 2015, p. 75), I wondered, what might Mission Creek have to teach me or show me about healing? How might water help me develop a more profound sense of belonging? How might I embody a more wild, ecological identity in fresh ways that encourage wellbeing?

### Research Methods

As mentioned, I took up a form of autophenomenographical (White, 2013), embodied writing (Anderson, 2001) to explore wellbeing, water, and ecological identity through a series of place bonding experiences at Mission Creek. As researcher, I respectfully approached the creek through the building of our mutual relationship. By responsively meeting life there, in all its myriad forms, I hoped to discover at that connection point newfound perceptions of wellbeing or perhaps just the grace of being part of a fluid, more mysterious, conversation. I was curious to know if this research approach would deepen my understanding of my own ecological identity and help me communicate more fluently with others about self, water, and felt expressions of wellbeing.

If I was being true to what nature-responsive research might require, then I knew that I must send down wide rhizomatic roots to ground myself and firmly plant my investigation in my personal lived experiences at the water's edge and just listen (Abram, 1996/2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; van Manen, 2016). This was a good reminder for me because I tend to want to branch off too widely. I imagined that with deep roots, a new and mysterious living work would take shape each day as I delved further into a writing-as-inquiry paradigm (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and an embodied exploration by sitting, bonding, and responding in place by Mission Creek.

Phenomenology, the overarching field of autophenomenography, is a qualitative research method of "*human science*" (van Manen, 2016, p. 11). Autophenomenographical inquiry then consists of *auto* (personal), *phenomenology* ("how one orients to lived experience" [van Manen, 2016, p. 22]), and *graphy* (a process of writing or recording). I chose autophenomenography

because I desired the writing of my lived experiences to illuminate what hermeneutic, phenomenological philosopher, Heidegger called “*being-in-the-world*...where his perspective encompassed people and world as inextricably and wholly interconnected” (Leighton, 2014, p. 39). Further, this study was rooted in Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/2012) insights of embodied perception, where autophenomenology emphasizes the importance of personal (subjective) lived bodily experience in shaping essence and understanding of reality. van Manen (2016) writes,

Essence is not a single, fixed property by which we know something; rather, it is meaning constituted by a complex array of aspects, properties, and qualities—some of which are incidental and some of which are more critical to the being of things. (p. xv)

Phenomenological research “involves both rich descriptions of the lived experience of a phenomenon...where the researcher has adopted an open attitude that, at least initially, refrains from importing external frameworks and sets aside judgements about the realness of the phenomenon” (White, 2013, p. 243). Employing this method “requires an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (van Manen 2016, p. xi). Pursuing an autophenomenographical approach then offered the opportunity to analyze personal “written descriptions of sustained experiences of a phenomenon rather than focusing on the [researcher’s] relationship with a cultural or subcultural social place or group” (White, 2013, p. 243).

My two primary autophenomenological methods—place bonding (Leighton, 2020) and embodied writing (Anderson, 2001)—seem most appropriate approaches for researching lived experience (van Manen, 2016) at the confluence of ecological identity, water, and wellbeing. An embodied inquiry links the transcendental (spiritual) with practical experience and offers

connections to things that may be perceived as yet undefined, rather than expressly felt or focused on, yet nonetheless exist with substance in this present reality (Snowber, 2016).

According to Anderson (2001), embodied writing involves mixing the act of writing with my body's vibrant and diverse sensory experiences. It captures and expresses the authenticity of human encounters, intertwining our senses with those of the world around us. This form of writing emphasizes that existence is deeply connected to the tangible and sensory world we inhabit. Embodied writing is not just a writing style, but an embodiment in and of itself as it draws writers close to natural elements like creeks and rocks, awakening our bodily senses. Through this practice, embodied writing not only becomes a communication technique but also beckons a transformative journey that nurtures an enlivened sense of being present within the world.

Anderson (2001) offers a further seven distinct elements of embodied writing that aim to accomplish what is described above, which are:

1. True-to-life, vivid depictions intended to invite sympathetic resonance in the readers or audience.
2. Inclusive of internal and external data as essential to relaying the experience.
3. Written specifically from the inside out.
4. Richly concrete and specific, descriptive of all sensory modalities, and often slowed down to capture nuance.
5. Attuned to the living body.
6. Inclusive of narratives embedded in experience, often first-person narrative.

7. Poetic images, literary style, and cadence serve embodied depictions and not the other way around. (pp. 87-89)

Embodied writing can be mysterious intersection between my physical body and Earth's body, the ethereal and the tangible, my senses and feelings, imagination and perceived reality, the unconscious and conscious life to name a few examples. However, this is also where potential awaits, necessitating trust and courage in myself to be in these liminal places and write about it.

An embodied approach can offer portals “for inhabiting one's own extraordinary life...This is a grammar of the heart, the grammar of the gut, taking action into form” (Snowber, 2016, p. 21). My body offers just such a portal and research site for me to be able to listen and access intuition, imagination, and perception (“data” if you will) and in turn, further explore and express this through writing to notice what happens in this connectiveness and presence (Abram, 1996/2017; Bachelard, 1983; Hillman, 1989; Leighton, 2020; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Snowber, 2016; White, 2013). I wanted to be listening to what the world speaks through me and what that means in terms of how I might access more of my own river nature and become part river myself as I contemplated lessons arising from my experiences of and with water that burble to the surface of my senses.

## **Methodology**

The phenomenological works of Abram (1996/2017) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) play an over-arching being-in-the-world role in my research; however, embodied methodologies (Anderson, 2001; Snowber, 2016) and writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) were the subsets of lived experience (van Manen, 2016) through which I situated myself and retrieved data for this research. Embodiment through an apprenticeship with water

where I took up by a practice of learning from water, employed imagination (Bachelard, 1983; Hillman, 1989) and creativity and allowed a kind of bonding and intimacy.

Embodied writing (Anderson, 2001) captured reflections of bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions that arose while sitting by rock and creek and reflecting on these experiences after place bonding (Leighton, 2020). In a radical form of phenomenological presence, building upon bodily sensations can allow bodily-held wisdom (this includes expanding consciousness through lived experience) to become language on my journal pages, or what Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) calls the “gestural signification” (p. 184) or “emotional essence” (p. 193) of language, and can intimate how language is first learned through the body. Abram (1996/2017) expands on this to include world-body when he writes, “at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*” (p. 81). This was the site of the largest conversation I hoped to have, with the world speaking, and my body-mind responding, in flow.

As a researcher, while I may be somewhat familiar with the concepts of this study, I must also be aware of my audience (Takach, 2016) because if embodied experiences are not clearly communicated, other people may not be able to relate to the content or take up these practices themselves. This meant I had to also be mindful of what sorts of questions I asked while being guided by wonder and mystery as the study unfolded. I knew and appreciated that while I am in the world, and the world is in me, I bring my own lenses, biases, worldviews, and ways through which I sense and perceive the world in a subjective, phenomenological sense (Abram, 1996/2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; van Manen, 2016; White, 2013). And yet, I wanted to attempt to synthesize thoughts born from my senses and perceptions with what I was hearing and

attuning to, as impossible as that task seemed to be to me. As phenomenology is concerned with the essence of things, the process of capturing essence in writing is like attempting to hold water in the palm of your hand—a fleeting and mercurial process (H. Leighton, personal communication, January 30, 2024)!

Richardson & St. Pierre's (2005), *Writing as Inquiry* guided me in discerning and clarifying symbolic components and metaphors as they arose. Writing as inquiry can assist the researcher in generating fresh insights, clarifying thinking, and engaging with subject matter through a variety of perspectives by writing and rewriting (Richardson, 2000). Two critical areas of writing as inquiry are Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) and crystallization.

First, CAP is the exploratory and innovative approach of engaging with a complex subject like embodied writing, blending analytical rigor with creative thinking which I will explore a bit further in my section on validity. This approach within writing as inquiry actively questions assumptions, experiments with diverse perspectives, and synthesizes unique insights in order to expand understanding. Second, crystallization involves capturing and articulating emerging insights while noticing patterns that develop through writing and rewriting. As more is written, it is as if crystals begin to form from transforming complex thoughts into coherent and concise written expressions and helped to clarify and solidify my understanding of embodiment (Leighton & Noble, 2023).

### **Research Design**

As I mentioned in the previous section, the Indigenous name of Mission Creek is *N'wha-kwi-sen*, meaning "smoothing stones" (Okanagan Historical Society, 1948, p. 212). In a way, I was beginning my research design in rough and jagged channels, unsure of what may be



discovered at this confluence of ecological identity, water, and wellbeing while sitting with large, old, and what I considered to be wise rocks at the river. As this research evolved, and I discovered where flow was, or was not, present within me, I imagined some smoothing occurred.

I hoped my approach would help me build a deeper relationship with Mission Creek, which I view as one of my neighbours. This relationship I hoped, would evolve by having twelve half-hour place bonding sessions throughout the month of September, at various times of day, and in all types of weather. One rock by Mission Creek had caught my attention since I began my graduate studies as I felt this rock was in some way guiding me. Rock's sturdy and substantial nature offered assurance to me as it had been a neighbour to creek for many years, and upon asking and receiving rock's permission, I hoped to anchor my research from this locale or move on to another place where "permission" was granted for me to sit and learn (Leighton, 2020).

I purposefully kept the design of this research looser in structure as the process was intended to be fluid and reflect the seasonal nature of water (Harper, 2022; Strang, 2020) yet still offer expressible clarity to fulfil the purposes of the research, in an attempt to answer the research questions. As mentioned, the twelve sessions at the creek were roughly thirty minutes each. Each session was planned to consist of a five-minute walk from my house to the creek, greeting and staying with rock, taking time to journal, then walking down to creek, and staying there for most of the time, journaling a little more, then closing with a prayer of gratitude before a five-minute walk back to my house. I was careful to always offer my deep gratitude in recognition of the reciprocity of my relationship with rock and creek teachers (Kimmerer, 2013).

During this time with rock and creek, I intended to pay attention to creek's movements, sounds, feeling, and colours, noticing what and who was there, and what I was sensing. As unmediated as possible, I wanted to write down my experience in that lived moment (White, 2013) with creek. By listening to the land and Mission Creek, noticing what I noticed without any preconceived expectation, I listened and wrote using "language that authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking *of* it...as Merleau-Ponty says, a language that sings the world" (van Manen, 2016, p. 13), truthfully noting anything that happened, attuning to what this place wanted to voice *through* me.

Once home, I expected to journal any further reflections from my time with rock and creek. A few days after each visit to the creek, the crystallization process began as I re-read my journals, then journaled a third time about the previous place bonding session as praxis. At this time, I anticipated adding any creative insights that had "crystalized" since my previous visit(s) to the creek. This was an iterative process, as I continued to do this each time and finally re-read all entries at the end of my data gathering period, allowing insights to arise, new connections to crystalize, and form and understanding to take place.

This required letting go of specific expectations, outcomes, judgements, or egoic tendencies and required that I remained present with what illuminated a spectrum of experiences ranging from disruptions to wholeness. In this way, I wished to honour any other questions that may have arisen for me on this journey aside from my research-specific questions—the kinds of big and beautiful questions poet David Whyte says, "have no right to go away" (2020, p. 23).

### **Treating Data and Findings**

To stay authentic to this kind of embodied, intuitive writing process, I avoided using traditional language about data analysis as it seemed inapposite for this research. Instead, distilling and clarifying the patterns or themes from writing was where I employed what cyberneticist Nora Bateson (2017) refers to as “warm data”, specifically the perceiving of inter-relational processes along with the recognizing of repeating patterns that have emerged in my research, akin to those found in multiple complex systems (Meadows, 2008).

Journal entries were the primary source I drew my data from, in order to understand how my relationships and reflections from those experiences began to aggregate and form or crystallize into prominent themes, repeating patterns, and complex findings. Data was treated like gems of insight that I kept close with me and looked at from different facets and perspectives throughout this process.

Interpreting and communicating the meanings I gleaned from these gems was subjective in nature, making it challenging for this type of subjective work to be either proven or disproven (Leighton, 2014). Findings that “ring true” mean they resonated for me and hopefully for others reading this work. I had to rely on expanding this for readers through my writing, rather than relying on the works of other writers here. The truth of my personal present-in-the-moment experience and the words I chose to express that experience—which made this a phenomenographical (White, 2013) and original study—was what mattered most here.

### **Validity and Ethical Considerations**

To further enhance the validity of my findings, I used CAP principles (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) as a kind of lens to ensure these five criteria were met in my work: “substantive

contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of a reality” (Richardson, 2000, p. 253). This means that as I go about research, I plan to ask myself:

1. Will these findings contribute to the field?
2. Are these findings beautiful?
3. Are my findings, art, and writing responsive and reflexive to my experience?
4. Do these findings hold potential for others in terms of relatability and resonance?
5. Do these findings ring true for me, and is my writing true? (Richardson, 2000)

Beautiful findings have diverse aesthetic qualities that can cultivate enlivening emotional or sensory experiences (e.g., joy, pleasure, wonder) within us, causing us to wake up to ourselves and the world around us by noticing the form, colour, texture, scale, and scope of that which has caught our attention (Abram, 1996/2017; Harding, 2006; Strang, 2020; Weber, 2016). Asking CAP questions after using the crystallization process bolstered the rigor and validity of this research without it losing any of its particularity or being subject to reductionism as is common in some forms of more traditional analysis. As noted in the introduction, to love a place is to bond with it because the feeling of love returning from the earth transforms our own ways of being into something sacred which cannot be dissected or triangulated or treated with anything but respect. In that regard, I might suggest now— if I may be so bold—that love was also part of my methodology, although I acknowledge this speaks to a form of novel and unusual ethics— wild ethics perhaps (Abram, 1996/2017; Leighton, 2014).

Relevant to the integrity and ethics of this research is that this research took place in Syilx Okanagan Territory, and I am a non-Indigenous resident-settler of these lands. By asking permission from creek and rock before approaching them (Leighton, 2020), leaving the place

better than I found it each time I left, and ending sessions with a prayer of gratitude honouring any newfound senses of kinship and gifts bestowed upon me (Kimmerer, 2014; 2017), I was always respectful and ethical in my engagement with Mission Creek.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study can be understood in three broad categories: geography, personal bias, and chronology. This study's main anticipated limitation is geographical, as it is situated only in Kelowna (in the Okanagan region of British Columbia, Canada) and takes place in precisely one location along Mission Creek. Although these practices can be performed in other locations, the research design is limited to the experience of building a relationship with just one place. It is also important to note the inherent limitation of any subjective study given personal history, context, and direct experiences mediated through a person's worldview, mind, and body. These can be understood as my biases and inevitably coloured my research findings in a particular way. The result is that my findings—no matter how vivid—cannot be generalizable. Further, this study was limited by chronology, as there would inevitably be different findings if more time were permitted for more comprehensive data collection over extended time frames and seasons.

Some might suggest that “conversing” with creek borders on the anthropomorphic. However, I suggest that my conscious approach to the phenomena was more along the lines of a deep identification (see *The Work That Reconnects* in Macy & Brown (2014)) with creek's living nature, its essence per se, and by no means are my words here claiming the definitive expression of such a wild being!

### **Findings: Perceptions & Reflections at the Creek of Smoothing Stones**

Here I offer portions of my journal from my time by the creek as a channel to voice what this profound embodied phenomenographical experience has been like for me, and how this pertains to wellbeing. I have also integrated some of the literature that informs this work because it upholds and affirms my lived experience. Please note: my journal voice is represented in *italics* block text to differentiate from the text and is an aggregate of many sittings over many days that have crystallized within this embodied writing process for me. As well, some journal writing samples, sketches, and poems have been added in appendices as they did not fit within these pages, yet still felt important to include as they contributed to my sense of meaning-making.

Linda Hogan (2007) writes, "...water and earth love each other...meeting at night, at the shore, being friends together, dissolving in each other, in the give and take that is where grace comes from" (p. 46). In a similar way to Hogan's words, I resonated with Macy & Brown's (2014) words, "What had appeared to be *other* can be equally construed as a concomitant of *self*, like a fellow-cell in the neural patterns of a larger body" (p. 41). As a concomitant cell within the body of Earth, I forged a friendship with creek through bonding with and responding to creek. While Hogan writes of relationships in a generative sense, Harding (2006) plainly states another reality of relationship: "Key indicators of planetary and social ill-health are growing exponentially fast, including species extinctions, water use, the damming of rivers, urban populations, the loss of fisheries, and average surface temperatures" (p. 19). Through this research, different forms of my health became apparent to me but so too did insights into how wellbeing manifests in nature and often these two mirror each other. Parts of myself have

dissolved through place bonding with creek, parts of me have become awakened, and my perceptions on grace, reciprocity, and time have certainly shifted.

Before expanding on these themes of grace, reciprocity, and time, to better situate readers with my experience of place bonding and my personal findings of being with creek, key moments from journal entries ironically and surprisingly—for research focused on water—begin with a sub-section called Fire.

### **Fire**

On this late August day, I question what it means to be well and how my relationship with this word and the experience of wellbeing are shifting as I spend time at and with creek. The longer I bond with this place, the potency of the wild waters becomes known to me, the deeper my respect grows (Abram, 1996/2017; Armstrong, 1995; Kimmerer, 2013). In bonding and responding, I also feel some deep form of pre-existing disconnection being remedied by the literature, my womanly body, and Earth's body.

*The natural world is more alive to me, and I feel I respond with it differently. I am doing this through the clothes I buy or the food I eat, considering how this affects Earth's water and what actions I can take to minimize my impact on water. Body and water are kin. I think about my body's relationship with water, how my thinking will become so critical when my abdomen bloats, yet my body is doing this as a way of bringing itself into equilibrium and homeostasis. If my body is holding water, what am I metaphorically being asked to let go of, or consciously holding on to?*

This bonding with Earth's body also cultivates an ever-deepening awareness of embodied essence (Leighton, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; van Manen, 2016). A constant question swirling within and around me:

*What exactly is wellbeing? How am I embodying this?*

It is no simple task to communicate potential answers to these questions in ways that encompass essence through context, language, and (inter)subjectivity when “every interpretation can be called into question; every inquiry we can begin anew; every hermeneutic phenomenological conversation is unending” (van Manen, 2016, p. xv).

As I write this, I am driving from Kelowna to Vancouver for meetings requiring in-person interactions. All my significant belongings are packed because I have left a city ablaze. In the last 24 hours, my hometown of Kelowna, BC, declared a state of emergency (Macdonald et al., 2023), and hours later, the province of British Columbia declared the same. The city and the province are being led and dominated by fire. Over 30,000 people are under evacuation order in the Okanagan alone (Macdonald et al., 2023), with thousands more on order or alert throughout the province. In the Okanagan, entire neighbourhoods have been burnt to the ground, and officials are coy in answering exactly how many homes have been destroyed as the wildfires remain dynamic. In my body, I feel shock, grief, weariness, deepening sadness, all the emotions that death and destruction conjure up that leave a tightness in my belly, a heaviness on shoulders and behind my eyes, feelings that go far beyond words.

*This fire's wildness permeates through my being in a natural, uncontrived, tangible way.*

*Multiple times a day, whether through media or talking with friends and neighbours, language like “battle” and “fight” are being used, and I feel my body seize up. However,*



*I intuit that different feelings and sensations are meant to be openly felt as they come and go, no matter how unpleasant.*

Schumacher (as cited in Harding, 2006) states, “Modern man talks of the battle with nature, forgetting that if he ever won the battle he would find himself on the losing side” (p. 19). Being in relationship with nature does not mean we must overtake it. Rather, being in relationship with nature can cultivate curiosity, humility, and newfound forms of interdependence. Nature can shift human perspectives; it can evoke grief for what has been lost and surrendered to more-than-human elements, and in this case, through fire. Courage is linked to fear, and joy to suffering (Chödrön, 2017; Macy & Brown, 2014) as each are the other side of the same coin. If we love something, we feel connected to it: “Our sorrow is in equal measure love. We only mourn what we deeply care for” (Macy & Brown, 2014, p. 121). Naturally, when that love connection is disrupted or severed, sadness arises, however we do not need to battle that sadness (Snyder, 1990/2020) or repress pain (Macy, 2021). Earth elder Joanna Macy reframes outrage and offers that anger stems from our inherent passion for justice, and so when my community felt the injustice of these fires, many opted for angry battle language and a fighting mentality. Anger, like fire, can be a refining experience. As Chödrön (2017) states, “The idea isn’t to try to get rid of your anger, but to make friends with it, to see it clearly with precision and honesty, and also to see it with gentleness” acknowledging it, knowing it completely, then surrendering it (p. 24-25).

*I remind myself to relax. At this moment, although chaos abounds in my external environment, I can choose to be at peace inwardly. There is nothing to fight, battle, or*

*brace for; instead, I feel like Earth is inviting me into an ever-deepening kinship where there is less separation from “other” and more of a sense of oneness.*

This does not take away from my feelings of grief, anger, or diminishment, but assists me on a path of wonder, compassion, openheartedness, and interconnectedness that makes up life on Earth (Chödrön, 2017; Macy & Brown, 2014; Nhat Hanh, 1993).

*What is Earth calling me to in a moment like this? What does it look like to embody wellbeing within my body’s environment and that of Earth? How are the internal and external in relationship, or lacking relationship?*

### **Bonding with the Land: A Rhizomatic Act**

When in Kelowna again, to make sense of the sensations within my body, I go to the creek of “smoothing stones”, letting the river work on the rough edges within and around me. Go as a river, Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) says. “Go. As a river. Go”. To me, wellbeing speaks of flow, but I sense many areas lacking flow within my own body and the body of the world (Blackie, 2016; Ensler, 2013), hence why I am undertaking this research, and I am sitting in this place beside water. As humans do, waters need love and care to heal (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021). In many traditional contexts, water is nature’s most fundamental, powerful, and sacred element: it can be considered both teacher and medicine because it cleanses, heals, nourishes, and replenishes (Armstrong, 1995; Dennis & Bell, 2020; Hogan, 2007; Kimmerer, 2013; Mann, 2022; McGregor, 2015; Nepo, 2018; Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021; Peltier, 2022; Strang, 2020). Water, or *siwłk<sup>w</sup>* as the Syilx Nation calls it, “teaches us that anything is possible and that we are resilient and able to adapt” (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021, p. 16).

*Water, what do you want me to notice?*

*I look up the hill and sense a welcome from a rock above. After walking up creek's bank, I stop and look down my side, where one rock sticks out to me more than the others, and I meet the rock's gaze. What exactly is it about this rock that I sense a call towards? After feeling the rhythm of my breath come and go, sensing the mist and cooler humid air of creek dancing on my face, and marveling at how strong and sure I feel in my body having my feet rooted in this place, I feel at home.*

These times of bonding in place with the land can be viewed as a “rhizomatic” act. Rhizome comes from ancient Greek “ρίζωμα, rhízōma,” meaning “mass of roots” (Meakins, 2022, p. 398) where roots emanate from below the rhizome, and shoots arise from above. In this case, place bonding, research, and theory, which acknowledges various non-hierarchical exit and entry points in data interpretation and representation, mimics the rhizome's nature. In making a tangible connection of rhizomatic acts, I think of Tracy, a wild woman Sharon Blackie (2016) writes of, and many others who live or have lived “with an embodied sense of belonging to the land” developing “a sort of internal spaciousness, a simplicity which isn't dominated by the agendas and concerns of society” (p. 119). Going further, I am reminded of Armstrong's (1996) article, *Sharing One Skin*, where she describes how the Syilx Okanagan language links the lives of their people to the generations before and after this moment and the land which sustains them.

*It feels like the more this research goes on, the more rooted I become in this work, the more this work is rooting me in essence.*

### **Stepping Stones**

I notice what looks like jagged steps along one side of rock and think of how rock's shape resembles a heart (see Appendix A).

*What am I stepping into through this experience? What is breaking my heart?*

*Where will this metaphorical path of exploration take me?*

*My gaze shifts from rock's side to its top. Hands run up and down the striations, and the gradient of colour captivates me, reminding me of sand, crumbled seashells and white rock, and the darker ocean floor full of sea kelp further out or further below on rock.*

*Rocks are stable amidst wind, drought, fire, floods, and winter.*

*Rock, you feel cold. Can you sense the winter wind coming? A sense of envy courses through me for the ease with which rock seems to experience life. Something stirs within me, and I sense that as I grow and become, so too does the world around me, as it has its becoming of which I am part of.*

*Water's flow in creek,*

*ease of rock,*

*stability,*

*continuity.*

This place caused me to ponder the vast perceptions unfolding within me the more I spend time here.

*Today, I sit by rock, hugging rock, smelling rock's subtle mineral smell, taking in the comfort of rock's cold sturdiness amidst immense drought, parched earth, dust, determined weeds overtaking the blue grasses, and a sky full of smoke. I wonder how*

*many fires and storms rock has seen in their lifetime. I circle my hand around rock, rubbing rock, and as I do so, I feel my gut slowly uncoil and relax.*

*Thank you, rock, for your weightiness that is lifting weight within me.*

Paradoxically, the more time I spent beside rock, the lighter I felt and the more present I was within my body and the world around me.

### **Dwelling in the Present**

What a gift it is to be here now, in this moment culminated from a multitude of moments and happenings before it (Nhat Hanh, 2010). This could be wellbeing: being present with what is, without preference or judgment. As I rub rock, my thoughts wander from sadness, recalling the news of a friend who lost everything but the foundation of her home to the fire. While I got to go back to a house that is currently out of harm's way, she is now living with family and unsure what home for the next while will look like. I think of what it means to dwell in a place, to live in a dwelling, and how rapidly fire can shift perspectives of the meanings and connotations we derive from language and its multiplicitous meanings.

*How is it that I feel so at home in the world as I sit here, bonding with rock and creek?*

*Words fail in times like these, yet the emotions I embody continue swelling up within me. Grief sits behind my eyes. Tears do not come, yet they feel right there, amidst the presence of rock, a wise elder.*

Being put on evacuation alert—or worse, evacuation order—is a clarifying moment: I got to explore what I valued.

*Do your purchases or the living spaces you choose to dwell in add to your wellbeing?*

*What role do the rectilinear-shaped buildings we as a culture have embraced living in have in all this?*

Hillman (1989) is concerned about how buildings have been made in North America because we always look down. Down because the blasé angularity of joints that merge floor to ceiling offer no creative outlets for imagination; down at our computers because of the lack of creative ceilings; and, most significantly, down at ourselves. Moreover, these houses with mouldings that detract from imagination or curiosity, looking around or upwards instead of staring blankly at our feet or screens, are burning to the ground.

*And here I am, looking at the river, then up to its banks, then up to the shrubs, trees, and smoky sky above. I feel like I am standing in a liminal space that is palpably intimate.*

I walk down to creek, putting my hand in the water and again feel the cold enfolding around me: this is where my synaesthetic life-generating experiences with water begin.

*Oh, how lovely it is to be held by water within my being and in my external environment. As I relax my hand, I walk into creek's refreshing flow, feeling water ripple around me as my feet create ripples with each new step.*

*I am a ripple within many universal ripples.*

I asked myself what it meant to go with the flow, creating ripples that extend outward and interact with other ripples, causing new ripples to form:

*I think of the ripple effects of the fires engulfing this community I call home.*

*I say a prayer of thanksgiving for the birds, deer, bears, fungi, and other life that have found safety by creek while so many living on the mountains and lakeside around me*

*flee for their lives. I marvel at the intrinsic value and dignified ways these living beings exist around me.*

With this act of putting my hand in the water, I am grounded in the present moment and reminded of the persistence of life, its complexity, and its change.

*I remind myself to go as river, and I take up and ingest this healing tincture of presence before stepping out of creek.*

*Being in water, the smell of crisper and cleaner air is present.*

*Creek and surrounding trees create a canopy for me where a little light gets in, and ...clarity emerges slightly in the air I breathe and the feelings that swirl within.*

My thoughts turn towards what it is to be in flow as so much burns a short distance away. Creek, surrounding water bodies, and trees seem to be in a similar state to what they were the other day: doing what they can to clear smoke around this vast area and offer nourishment, dwellings, and consistency to the environment within and living beings around me amidst legions of flames running up and down mountains just a few kilometres away.

On Wednesday, I pulled into the driveway and saw a helicopter and water bucket flying above me, travelling to creek to douse out flames that began on the hillside close to where I sit. Within a few hours, the fire was out, and minimal death occurred to all the lives that make up creek and the surrounding area. Today, Saturday, I now find solace being with creek as its stream, although diminished from what it has been in years past, continues flowing out to Okanagan Lake, offering its water for more helicopters and waterbombers to lessen the storm of fire that has fallen on this community. Still, I question this thinking because it seems too human-centric.

*What is it that water and fire are inviting me to inquire anew?*

Fire is terrifying both in form and what it calls us to. Fire is refining; as this land and the homes we have built on it smolder or are entirely wiped out, something new forms. Right now, there is shock, anger, grief, a sense of impending doom. Defeated and no match, we are insignificant to these flames that radiate anger in their bright reds and orange tones. No gentle yellow glow to this fire. Ravaging, candling tree after tree into tall black toothpick-like lines, creating multiple weather systems from subdivision to subdivision, destroying buildings to the point that only portions of foundations remain, this fire seems to be yelling. With its energy consuming entire forests and regions of Kelowna, scattering or destroying deer, bears, flora, and fauna, shifting weather from blue skies and sunshine to blackened sky, high winds, and smoldering ground and buildings, this fire seems to be furiously angry and a great giver of grief, and so much more than our humanness has the capacity for. Or is it?

*Perhaps fire is helping illuminate gaps in my relationship with myself and the world, fracturing my sense of being a part of a system within systems. I feel myself compartmentalizing my emotive experiences like grief and fear. However, I know that to be well at this time, I must let these feelings and sensations roam within and around me. By doing this, connective plurality invites new forms of personal wellbeing that do not have to go up in smoke too.*

Perhaps, as a human, I am partially to blame for this scorching, by sleepily going along with the capitalistic excessive cultural norms all these years.

*“Stay awake, Rach,” I hear my inner self say.*

*I tell Earth I am listening. I am with you, creek, and rock.*



*Smoothing stones, smooth me. Creek, please show me how to flow more with you,  
from my inner essence to my outer life. Body, show me what I can do to participate fully  
in wellbeing within and around me.*

*Can I bring healing to my surroundings in the ways that you are?*

I think of creek's clean water travelling towards scorching temperatures and decay that will cause it to go from crisp and clear to hot and black. Water is forceful, but so is fire. Perhaps being well means being with clarity *and* darkness, light *and* dark, hot *and* cold, and finding the balance of these elements, just as it is in Traditional Chinese Medicine (Kaptchuk, 2000; Zhao, 2006). We need all elements to be well within our human bodies. If fluid transitions between elements is impeded, stagnation can eventually lead to greater illness (Kaptchuk, 2000; Zhao, 2006). Perhaps the spectrum, flow, and ranges of elements are what help define wellbeing.

I turn my mind to wellbeing and the many perspectives this topic is inviting me to explore further.

*Suddenly, the sky goes from dim, morbid, and dark to clear blue. The greater Earth winds  
have come, and oh, what welcome change they bring in dispersing the blackened fire  
wind skies so blue sky permeates through, yet I know with this wind is also a warning of  
fire's increasing ferocity and chaotic, unpredictable change.*

This blending of worlds teaches me things that are not easily communicated, yet that is the task before me. Thus, I continue embodying, living, sensing, and perceiving, attuning to ever-unfolding events within my body and Earth's body which I am part of, as my curiosity regarding wellbeing illuminates fresh insights and the kinds of "questions that make or unmake a life"

(Whyte, 2020, p. 23). Questions that are asked out of curiosity to pursue relationships and openings between us rather than simply receiving an answer.

The magnitude of these questions can be troubling at times as they exist in liminal space between the ethereal and the grounded, the light and the dark, the mysterious and the known, that which is not easily answered. Cyberneticist Donna Haraway (2016) writes that “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (p. 1). Haraway goes on to admit, “I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking” (2016, p. 31). To do this requires a kind of “thinking ‘between’” (Haraway, 2016, p. 34) which parallels van Manen’s (2016) notions where, “The essence of things depends precisely on the play between difference and sameness” (p. xv). Similarly, Hillman (1989) notes that “essences stand out the further we can move into each image, each fantasy, each event, working at distinctions within them rather than comparisons between them” (p. 65). Embracing uncertainty and in-between spaces without preference or judgement, letting imagination and intuition guide the way, opened the space and time for shifts in my thinking-perception to occur.

### **Enlivenment Amid Smoky Skies**

It is dark outside, the smoky skies a colour of beige grey, thick with the ash of too many Ponderosa Pines, animals, and urban neighbourhoods swept up in a trifecta of fires surrounding our valley home. I walk slowly and purposefully to creek, wondering what state the water and riverbanks will be in.

*As I walk, I attune myself to my inner workings: the tightness in my belly, frazzled,*

*scattered thoughts, and weighty shoulders. How familiar these sensations are becoming. Upon arrival at creek, I give thanks for the nourishing air and mist that dances more on my face the closer I get to the water. Today, the air surrounding creek smells more natural than the air I breathed on the street during my walk here. Cool mist wafts around me, welcoming me as I close my eyes and feel, smell, and listen to the water's burbles just beyond where I stand at creek's edge. My abdomen relaxes, and my arms open wide of their own volition. My body moves to take what those practicing yoga refer to as Mountain pose: standing, my legs feel more rooted to this place, arms stretch out at my sides, hands tingle being able to fully stretch towards Earth after typing on a keyboard too long, lower back muscles unclench, lungs expand deeper and deeper as my animal body breathes the nourishment of this place into my most inner being.*

I think of how creativity expressed through embodiment for myself as a woman is “not just in our arms, our hands—it is in our hearts, breasts, wombs, and vaginas, in our hormones and cycles of fertility” (Blackie, 2016, p. 195). Embodiment is a wild act; innate to humans, it often goes unnoticed and is under-valued in current-day life yet offers portals to deepen wellbeing and relationship with oneself and the world (Abram, 1996/2017; Ensler, 2013; Snowber, 2016).

*How marvelous is this simple moment of breathing and stretching, creatively responding to and being with my body and this land laced with water.*

I think of Weber's holistic perspective of enlivenment (2019), which highlights the animate interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms.

*I celebrate these mysterious innate connections I am growing in awareness of. Even though the sky above looks to be from another planet and the stench of smoldering*

*animal, forest, plastic, and metals is tinged through the air, my heart sings for the beauty, wonder, and quiet constancy that appears here in my body, here at the Creek of "Smoothing Stones"*

On this day, creek and its environs quench my dry and weary state in more ways than one, especially when I feel so heavy in my body when looking up at the ashen skies above, thinking about what the history of skies on this day has looked like over the years. Today is September 11, and I feel a darkness inside, grieved by the loss of life around me both on past days with this same date, and currently as three tumultuous forest fires burn near this place in which I stand.

The leaves of trees above me carry the ash of their kinfolk, yet creek's steady movement seems to have displaced ash for the plants and other beings living on its banks. As stated earlier in the paper, Kimmerer (2013) talks about how kinship moves in two directions; the fire is unexpected and immense, yet the trees, creek, and all that makes up this landscape continue holding life (including mine) as they had before the fire began. This embrace is vividly felt in reciprocal love when sensing and experiencing such tangible destruction (H. Leighton, personal communication, August 25, 2023). The water and fire seem balanced in their tenacity to hold their positions alongside but never overlapping. Water, whether through rain or human intervention of planes dropping lake water, will eventually overtake fire.

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, fire balances and contrasts with water (Kaptchuk, 2000; Zhao, 2006). Zhao (2006) writes, "All disorders and disease are the result of an imbalance in the body. The ancient Chinese perceived everything in the universe, including us, as an interplay between two opposing forces that are constantly shifting" (p. 15). These forces

are known as Yin and Yang. Fire, expansion, and sun are associated with Yang, while water, contraction, and moon are associated with Yin (Zhao, 2006).

*The refining and clarifying truth of fire and water, along with the wildness, wonder, and grief, met me as I sat beside creek. Water, seemingly undaunted, flushed and flowed over the smoothing stones that line the bed of creek.*

### **Life, Death, Health, and Flow**

*Refreshing, cool mist wafts around me as I close my eyes and feel, smell, and listen to the water's burbles. I feel like the soul of this place is as much in me as my soul is out there. This place restores me.*

*I feel a darkness inside, yet I am encouraged by the continuity of life around me.*

*Creek makes the same sounds it did yesterday. Creek, how can you seem so clear on a day like today? How can you offer such life and promise of salmon soon spawning?*

*How can you teach me to flow?*

I questioned again what rock, like creek, has seen over the millennium.

*Rock, what do you want to teach me?*

I wonder why, after all my formal education, the life of multidimensional beings of this landscape (Armstrong, 1995) so rarely enters my consideration. In reflecting on my own experience through writing, there is an apparent lack of interdependence and wellbeing in my self-centred perspective. Perhaps there is a call here for me to step more into wellbeing through the lens of inseparability that Brown (1995) speaks of as the redefining moment of human wellbeing in an ecological context. My sense of wellbeing relates to my personal health and the health of the planet; if one is out of sync, all three are impacted (Brown, 1995).

*What a wild thought. What a wild way of being.*

*Creek, have you become wilder?*

*Rock, over the years, as your edges get smoother and more people sit on or around you and touch you, have you been imparted wildness?*

As I sit, bonding with this place teeming with life, even though the smoky skies above carry messages of death, destruction, heartaches, and sadness, how is there still the promise of new life? As the salmon increase in this place in the coming days, only to die so their eggs can be birthed, is this the shaping that is also shaping me? The promise of new life, but first death, so new life can come. Is this the resemblance of ecological identity and fuller wellbeing?

### **Gratitude for Duck's Ways of Being**

*Thank you, wind, creek, sky, and rock.*

*Thank you for this moment to be and be seen by one another.*

Being present with this place, there is a longing within me to experience summer's parting gift of big open blue sky and vivid sunshine. The mallard duck whimsically floating down creek aids me in expanding perceptions. While slowly paddling his bright orange feet and looking around at other life forms, mallard is encouraging, reminding me of the diverse ways one can participate in and experience life even with sick-looking beige-grey skies and fires looming nearby.

Mallard duck's ways of being in creek's misty, cool, less-ashen space fragrant with minerals, mud, foliage, and mountain water, buoy my spirit. Winged creatures buzz around me. Birds and creek make the same sounds they did yesterday. The water's temperature is like yesterday's, too, as I dip my hand into creek, desiring to tangibly touch and thank creek for its

constant and gentle rhythms, how creek abides in this area even though the sky above and the air around it rapidly changes.

### **Tensions of Wellbeing and Suffering**

How does creek offer such life and the promise of salmon soon spawning when land close by has just burned so violently, and the incessant scorching of Earth endures? Being here with the water, I cannot help but notice that even the fire relief talk from experts confines our relationships with the world, reinforcing paradigms of dysfunction, domination, absolutes, and battle. After walking back to my desk, I sense this experience is leading toward the tension of what it is to be well.

*Can I be well—like creek—when the fires of life burn around me?*

Like the tension mist over creek holds—water from below, mixed with the smoky particles from the air above, yet cleansed by the trees around it—I perceive tensions exist within suffering and not suffering (Chödrön, 2017; Mann, 2022).

*Is it possible to be well amidst suffering?*

Through it all, the trees continue to extend their affections by filtering the air no matter the state of their surroundings (Blackie, 2016; Weber, 2019). Can wellbeing lie at the confluence of these tensions?

The wind comes and goes as a premonition of looming seasonal changes. Subtle chilling breezes contrast the heat on the hillside, bringing forth fall's transition, all at once surprising and yet familiar.

*I love you, wind. What are you shaking up within and around me? What are you blowing away so the light can hit a new spot within me? Or rather, is it that the ground can be*

*cleared so new seeds can sprout—seeds filled with potential threading their way into the soil of my essence in a rhizomatic fashion, embellishing the multidimensionality of my life?*

### **Restriction and Development**

*Creek, you once seemed to be fuller than you are, but does that restrict your sense of multidimensionality? How much did your banks used to spill over in springtime, and how much life could you hold for salmon and bears and other autumn friends before humans came in to "develop" the land around you?*

*Why are new neighbourhoods even called developments when they seem to do the exact opposite to you—narrowing your space, confining you to 30 metres and 11 kilometres instead of your original 120 metres and 30 kilometres you could once roam freely across as you meandered towards Okanagan Lake?*

*What does it look like for me to flow in 2023? Where have I narrowed my wide, unfettered path in the name of development?*

What am I as a human quantifying instead of qualifying? How limiting writing and language can be when “experience is always more immediate, more enigmatic, more complex, more ambiguous than any description can do justice to” (van Manen, 2016, p. xvii). Yet, creek is teaching me so much more of this relationship of experience and language and interdependence.

### **Curves of Creek and Rock**

*Looking at you, creek, you still carry life, you are still friends with wind, letting it shape*



*and move you, and rock continues supporting you. Salmon, although significantly decreased in number, still travel up from the Pacific Ocean to the Columbia River to you. I bet fifty years ago you had more animal friends, whereas now it seems your shores are trodden more consistently with humans. Did you lose some of your wildness by being forced into one place and having secondary streams dug to your right while roads and neighbourhoods continued being built on your left? Do you like mountain's protection? Did we as humans somehow protect you, and are we still protecting you even though we forced you into a prescribed shape with the city's engineers determining the ideal radius of your curves?*

*Creek, is it possible you become wilder in your essence?*

You remind me of a "river which winds through the land, soft like the curves of a woman's body as she stretches out to dip her toes in the sea" (Blackie, 2016, p. 3).

*Rock, over the years, as your edges get smoother and more people sit on or around you and touch you, have you become wilder, too?*

### **A Heart Song for This Time**

*Thank you for this moment to be and be seen by one another.*

*Thank you for this bond opening new pathways to wellbeing and dissolving my perceptions of other.*

*Rock. Creek. Land. Forest. Rachel C. L. Farr.*

*How much separates R and C and L and F from RCLF when our initials are the same, when my body comes from and is part of Rock, Creek, Land, Forest...Rhythm, Current, Leaning, Flow.*

*Thank you for teaching me what it is to embody: to perceive, incorporate, be shaped by,  
and personify that which is within and around me.*

This felt a little like wholeness to me. How appropriate that rain was now hesitantly dropping  
from the sky.

### **Distillation: More Discoveries at the Confluence**

While this distillation chapter may at times read similarly to the last, which includes some more of my lived experience and even a few journal entries, in this place I found I continued to deepen into what was surfacing for me in a non-linear way that was true to my overall meandering-river-like lived experience of this research. Here (and partly in the conclusions chapter), I turned toward the emerging horizon of my understanding and authenticity of being and belonging in the world and looked again at these questions that I had carried with me:

1. What does water know, and what can water teach me about my own suffering and wellbeing?
  - a. How might my apprenticeship with water allow a deepening of my ecological identity and sense of belonging to emerge?
  - b. How might water teach me to embody more of my own wild innate river-like nature?
2. How might this lived experience of building a more intimate relationship with water assist me in assisting others as an environmental communicator and educator?

Through allowing many perception-feeling-thought-threads to weave together, bonding with this place revealed a new-found comprehension of grace I have discovered in watching creek flow, as insights deepen and distill. Weber (2016) writes that if humans lack encounters with the beauty of nature, our souls may miss a vital aspect of comprehending the concept of grace and behave in accordance with that perception. Without feeling genuine emotional and physical bonds with the rest of life, my identity may become stunted and distorted, leading me to

crave a sense of completeness that I cannot attain on my own (Naess, 2005; Hillman, 1989; Snyder, 1990/2020). One of the crucial psychological roles other beings play in my life is to assist me come to terms with my pain by reminding me there is a greater story that expands beyond the human element (Macy, 2021; Snyder, 1990/2020; Weber, 2016). This allows me to see beyond myself because the more-than-human are at ease with the world. Even when my personal circumstances or emotions distract me from that reality, the presence of other-than-human beings can shift me from a sense of isolation and remind me that I am part of the greater tapestry of life beyond this moment. If I am not awake and attuned to the moment, I am not in flow; I am not in relationship with myself or the environment around me.

*Grace.*

It is here at the creek of “smoothing stones”, creek teaches me how to flow like a river and rock, whose upper side looks much like pebbles and sand moving out to the sea, reminds me of nature’s equilibrium which personifies and offers visual understanding of the dynamic and necessary tensions between life and death, suffering and not suffering, and how that relates to what it means to be well (Chödrön, 2017; Mann, 2022). Jungian James Hollis (1996) notes that, “Without suffering, which seems the epiphenomenal requisite for psychological and spiritual maturation, one would remain unconscious, infantile and dependent” (p. 8).

Grace and acceptance of the person that I am (and am becoming)—in this moment—is how I am learning to embody my wild river-like nature. Viewed through a lens of loving-kindness (Chödrön, 2017), I remain with questions that do not have concrete answers (Whyte, 2020) and I am realizing—synaesthetically experiencing—my kinship with the world beyond the human element goes much deeper than I once imagined. To attempt to clearly state what I have

discovered at the confluence of ecological identity, water, and wellbeing, I have chosen a triadic perspective to communicate and consider what has emerged: *Swells*, *Wells*, and *Dwells* will serve as guiding metaphors to deepen the discussion and clarify salient themes that have continued to crystallize within my research.

### **Swells**

Attuning to the swelling of water around river rock and within my body is where shape, form, and sound took me deeper into myself and aliveness. Relating my human bodily sensations to the moments by creek opened me to see similarities and provoked me to consider whether we share experiences.

*Creek swells; My body swells; fire in a forest swells.*

*Swelling in this way can be unpredictable, inconvenient, and life-altering.*

Through the course of any given year, the size, shape and colour of the river's body, my own body, and the physical landscape and animal creatures all change in moments, under duress, and due to seasonal shifts (Abram, 1996/2017; Ensler, 2013; Strang, 2020). Okanagan Syilx Indigenous traditions teach that “the body is Earth itself. Our flesh, blood, and bones are Earth-body; in all cycles in which Earth moves, so does our body. We are everything that surrounds us, including the vast forces we only glimpse.” (Armstrong, 1996, p. 463). These bodily changes are rhythmic and attuned to the environment, and to that which remains unseen, as well as to other living beings (Abram, 1996/2017). In reciprocity and or resonance (Strang, 2020; Weber, 2016), akin to how a bear's body swells as it gorges on salmon that travel back to their birthing pockets of the river bed and will subsequently dwindle as its reserves are depleted through winter hibernation, we can see the interconnected nature of body and home in dynamic forms—Earth's

body and our animal bodies (Abram, 2010; Blackie, 2016; Clinebell, 2013; Ensler, 2013). As swelling ebbed and flowed in creek's body, seeing creek change while also experiencing changes in my own body cultivated an enriched sense of home through this shared experience.

### **Intersections of Body, Deep Waters of the Unconscious Self, and Story**

Pinkola-Estés (1997) uses the river to symbolize the dynamic, intuitive, transformative, and cyclical aspects of a woman's life journey. She invites women to connect with their inner selves and embrace the potential of their intuition and personal growth. This is a significant departure from what Pinkola-Estés calls “status quo” shallow language (“behave yourself; don't make waves; don't think too hard; don't get big ideas; just keep a low profile”) that imposes societal norms and expectations, stifling natural instincts and intuition (p. 226). As well, Armstrong (1995), Blackie (2016), and others have joined in this work of deciphering and passing along ancient myths and stories relating to water, women, and wellbeing. Armstrong (1995) [along with Dennis & Bell (2020), Hogan (2007), McGregor (2015), and Peltier (2022)] emphasizes the profound ecological and cultural significance of water, the vital role of women in Indigenous communities acting as keepers of the water, and the overarching interconnectedness of ecology in communities to overall wellbeing.

Blackie (2016) has joined in this work of deciphering and passing along ancient stories relating to water, women, and wellbeing in the book, *If Women Rose Rooted*. Blackie highlights water's significance as a symbol of feminine and ecological interconnectedness, exploring how women who reconnect with water nature and ancient wisdom are offered empowering tools from the natural world to experience wellbeing in fresh ways made tangible through embodiment, myth, nature, and storytelling. For example, Blackie tells the story of The Selkie's New Skin (pp.

71-80), which symbolizes a woman's journey to reclaim her authentic self. Through the Selkie's transformation, she rediscovers her innate wildness by embracing her primal nature. Blackie uses this story to encompass the broader theme of women reclaiming their autonomy and returning to a more genuine connection with nature and their own inner wisdom. Water has both a symbolic and physical role in this story. Symbolically, water represents realms of emotions, connection to primal instincts, and the unconscious depths the Selkie must explore to find herself. Physically, water is the element the Selkie uses to move between her human and seal forms, embodying the fluidity of transformation and identity. These symbolic and physical attributes of water serve as a gateway for the Selkie to embark on her personal journey of self-discovery. By writing the Selkie's story, Blackie highlights the transformative power of immersing in the depths of one's own psyche and the more conscious and authentic sense of being that can come from roaming around these mysterious deep waters. All these authors write holistically about wellbeing by incorporating nature, storytelling, and myth to foster a sense of purpose and belonging and deepen connections with nature to embrace one's unique essence in ways that lead to personal and collective wellbeing.

*A significant and consistent thought from my time by creek is to remember what it is like to be going as a river—going with the flow of life as it swells naturally and rhythmically.*

*Life is not static; shifts are laden with variegated intensity.*

A riverbank swells to make room for more, expanding, shifting, and decreasing as it responds to the environment. In this same vein, wellbeing invites me to continue to expand my consciousness as I grow through my lived experience. Paradoxically, I have an open life-long invitation to shed (contract) the untruths that constrain my ultimate potential (Bachelard, 1983; Brown, 1995;

Hillman, 1995; Hogan, 2007; Plotkin, 2010), which often requires a time of immense interiorization, like a caterpillar cocooning so she can become a butterfly to live into her potential more fully (Plotkin, 2003). But myth stories act as counter-narratives that bring a larger truth to our lives as a kind of wellspring of eternal wisdom we can drink deep draughts from.

## **Well**

From time immemorial, humans have sought out, excavated, drilled down, and or plumbed to find water: healing, refreshing, nourishing, and sustaining the source of all life. As I consider a variety of frames for *well*—some literal, some metaphorical, and some ancient—a common theme that emerges is the invitation to dig inward to a deeper place.

A wellspring possesses an animate characteristic in that it continually springs forth from the earth, bringing healing properties that are exuberant and extraverted in nature even though their sources are veiled and mysterious (Blackie, 2016). Also, wellsprings must be sought out, and can be challenging to find or locate. A wellspring is unique in that it springs up and pours itself forth from deep parts of the earth. This is why wellsprings are often regarded as pure and sacred, offering refreshment to all living beings wherever they break through the surface of the earth.

Experiencing the life in, through, and around the creek of “smoothing stones” in September 2023 is a pouring forth from this research—a gift I am still unwrapping. Amid fire and turmoil in other areas of the forest, this place offered cool mist and calming burbles where other forms of life could find sustenance. Fire had my attention, yet how fire interacted with water, which is always in and around me, offered gifts of healing balms for my soul and a newfound sense of time, change, and subtle transformation that I am still unwrapping.



At my times by the creek, I would ponder how water's high-heat capacity can match fire's voracity, as water overtakes fire, yet I believe both are needed to be well. Sometimes I sense that what I fear the most is the fire—that which is raging, angry, and stirs up angst within me. However, I need fire to burn away the old parts of myself and regenerate or rebirth the new. Fire provides light in the darkness, igniting inspiration, curiosity, and passion. Water too is needed for life, and, like the vastness of the ocean can be profound and turbulent both literally and metaphorically, as water symbolizes mysterious realms of the unconscious. Fire is land-based and can travel to high heights of earth, while water goes the deepest depths. Water transforms and unifies, going with the flow instead of resisting change. These insights and relationships with fire and water will stay with me as I continue exploring the depths of unconsciousness in my lived experiences, through story, and myth.

Myths “are the deepest innermost cultural stores of our human journeys toward spiritual and psychological growth” (Hogan, 2007, p. 51) and can be like a wellspring, a source of eternal knowing. Linda Hogan writes that myths represent, “...the deepest, innermost cultural stories of our human journeys toward spiritual and psychological growth” (2007, p. 51). Myths act as a portal for us “to hear the world new again” (Hogan, 2007, p. 51). Like myths, wellsprings are beyond the confines and control of the human element and can hydrate my imagination as I explore new landscapes (both internal and external) and deeper consciousness. Myth stories provide moral grounds, wisdom wells. In pan-cultural exemplifications such as the Hindu story of Saraswati, analogies of the lives of the gods can assist in discerning ancient truths that when told, can be understood as still being true of contemporary human experiences and how we are living in this moment.

In Hindu mythology, Saraswati, the goddess of art and knowledge, represents the concept of flowing like a river (Nepo, 2018). She was birthed in the invisible, life-sustaining Saraswati River. This river had historically nurtured natural, human, and spiritual resources, encompassing water in both its authentic material form and its metaphorical form representing the flow of love and truth (Nepo, 2018). The eternal and epic struggle between flowing like Saraswati and hoarding Earth's water like the snake demon Vritrasura, was a central theme in the Rigveda, the sacred collection of Sanskrit hymns. Of course, Saraswati prevails in the end illustrating how it is a loving act to move from a hoarding, self-centered, narrow mentality to a more flowing one where in this myth story, the world becomes well, and life continues.

### ***Being Well***

I have come to understand that for me, wellbeing is a state of being at ease with what is, where hope and curiosity can hold space for the complexities of grief, despair, mystery, and death. Part of my wellbeing is opening myself up to allow emotions and life experiences to shape and expand my perceptions and perspectives.

A well holds water—the vital source that makes up and contains all life (Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2021). In older times, people would specifically go to a well to refresh and get much-needed water. No wonder a community was often built around wells or waterways (Strang, 2020). If I think of myself as a well, I wonder what I am holding that I can offer to the community around me. How pure and cleansing is my water? If I step into an environment, like water, how do I transform that space or fit that space? Do I reflect water's cyclical nature?

***Well: A Modern Departure***

Today, many still draw their water from wells. However, in a distinct contrast to the foci of community, we now force pipes into the earth to tap into watersheds, which are siphoned with the power of electric pumps to extract the water invisibly until it reaches the sink. Retrieving water has gone from a ritual or task that required our embodied effort to an absent-minded activity of simply turning on a tap. The result is immediate gratification that requires no thought on the part of the individual or where the water comes from, cut off from source by convenience. This can feed a Vritrasura-type hoarding mentality in a human-centric world disconnected from other forms of life on Earth and their inherent value.

***Wellbeing Through Bonding and Nourishing***

Through sitting and bonding with creek, I noticed creek was well and served as an example of what it meant to naturally be a source of strength and healing upon which I could draw. When I say “to go as a river”, might that also mean to embrace wellbeing in a generous and generative Saraswati-sense so that others may perhaps draw upon my essence and my capacity to naturally flow too? My sense of embodiment descended beyond the practice of being fluid or flexible. It seemed to cultivate a curiosity and motivation that reached into my depths and drew from my inner life essence of being. In this way, water bodies can be tangible teachers.

***Ecological Identity IS True Nature***

The river is just how it is. It is not contrived. Elemental forces may act upon the river and have some bearing on its capacity but not its true essence. The same might be said for humans. We all come from our mothers, and though genetics or upbringings can shape us, according to Hillman’s (1997) Acorn Theory, these forces alone cannot alter the essence of the seeds of

potential we are born with just as the acorn holds the blueprint of the mighty oak inside. While Hillman (1997) writes that each of us having the seed of potential or soul's code already written within us, Plotkin (2021) expands on this, noting that if we attune ourselves to the discovery and development of the unique role we each fulfill in the web of ecology, we can more likely mature and answer our true calling to participate more fully in the world. Plotkin summarizes this idea as an individual's unique "ecological niche" (Plotkin, 2021, p. 6) or eco-niche, following and furthering Naess's (2005) notion of ecological identity. Just as rocks are an essential part of the riverbed and how the river flows, to be conscious of this means there is potential for humans to recognize that we are part of Earth and in that relationship, we too are here to fulfill a unique role, bringing our unique gifts to bear in co-existence and flow with the living world.

For myself, this research has cultivated creative ways I can bond with the land while also exploring and growing more fully into the maturing parts of myself—from an inward feeling and embodied place to an actual animate, lived place outwardly. What part of co-existence might I fulfill?

There is no question to my mind now that wellbeing and embodiment are significant threads of the tapestry that is my life, and long after this research ends, I vow to continue discovering wellbeing in its fullest expression both within myself and within the natural world around me and to carry on my learning in this kind of conversation. Opening myself up to synaesthetic expressions within my body and through reflective writing, rather than solely thinking or retaining knowledge from other authors for instance, is like watering the seeds of the potential within me, letting the river-rock experiences shape and shift me so more of my essential potential can be realized and expressed more fully in my life.

## **Dwelling**

Phenomenologist Heidegger's concept of "*being-in-the-world*" came from the German *dasein* meaning *to dwell* (Leighton, 2014, p. 39). I consider that the nature and character of water is to dwell. Dwelling, in the way I am using it, can be thought of as "remaining". For example, when describing her experience at a sweat lodge ceremony, Hogan (2007) writes,

We swallow water and breathe smoke. By the end of the ceremony, it is as if skin contains land and birds. The places within us have become filled. As inside the enclosure of the lodge, the animals and ancestors move into the human body, into skin and blood. The land merges with us. The stones come to dwell inside the person... We who easily grow apart from the world are returned to the great store of life all around us, and there is the deepest sense of being at home here in this intimate kinship. (p. 41)

Water is a part of all life and personifies this in often invisible and silent yet nurturing ways, filling a sense of relationship I have with myself while exemplifying the larger relationship all living things have with each other even if I may not always be aware of this.

## ***Home***

Creek and rock have illuminated my sense of home as being within myself and stretching out to become part of the larger body of Earth. I am at home in the world, and the world is at home in me.

To be human, in a phenomenological sense, we are continually being invited to come home through our perceived lived experiences. One meaning of ecopsychology is to dwell or abide in a place (Hillman, 1997). David Whyte (2020) notes,

It is as if as human beings, no matter its outward form, we find it impossible to live in the world without some sense of home; that even in despair, we are able to find another beautiful form of shelter, a home at the core when all outer homes seem to have been stolen away (p. 108).

We all are birthed from a unique form of home: a womb, which has various meanings and significance in embodiment, symbolism, metaphor, and myth (Bachelard, 1983; Blackie, 2016; Ensler, 2013; Mann, 2022; Plotkin, 2003; Strang, 2020; Zhao, 2006). For example, caves are a symbolic womb within Earth (Blackie, 2016; Hogan, 2007). Wombs are mysterious, dark, warm, nurturing, engendering places of creation (Bachelard, 1983; Plotkin, 2003; Zhao, 2006), synonymous with transformation, rebirth, wisdom, inspiration, awe, and knowledge (Mann, 2022; Strang, 2020). Home can be an emotionally loaded term for some, yet we are all birthed from the same womb-space within a (mothering) body within the Earth-mother's body, a nesting of systems of interdependence.

### ***Interdependence***

To be awake to interdependence required that I lingered with that which was within and beyond myself. By bonding and responding with creek, I became alive with rock, fish, bear, deer, tree, bird, wind, rain, moon, sun, smoke, grief, stench, death, and birth. Just in writing this, I am bothered by reading a capital I and lowercase tree or moon or rock. I am still working through this and questioning my choices. However, I am clear that my desire from the beginning was to write from a place of kinship with the natural world in ways that respect, honour, and celebrate interdependent, animate, awesome, alive beings. This experience was a profound initiation for me into the consistency of the flow of natural and universal patterns (day/night,

spawning/birth/death, fire/water/regeneration). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) writes of how consciousness is gained for consciousness' sake:

The essence of consciousness is to provide itself with one or many worlds, to make its own thoughts exist in front of itself like things, and sketching out these landscapes and abandoning them indivisibly demonstrates its vitality. (p.132)

As my consciousness grows, my perceptions expand; and I experience a certain kind of death of some of my old ways of being, that seem to make room for the birthing of new forms of embodiment to be expressed through this newfound relationship between inward and outward landscapes. In this way, my consciousness speaks to my wellbeing in all its mysterious and wild forms.

### *Dwelling is Wild*

Wild does not necessarily have to mean unkempt. Instead, wildness can be full of beauty and complexity beyond measurement, linearity, and human understanding. Harding (2006) cites, "...we urgently need to make peace with nature by rediscovering and embodying a worldview that connects us with a deep sense of participating in a cosmos suffused with intelligence, beauty, intrinsic value and profound meaning" (p. 19). These same ideas are also prevalent in Indigenous ways of understanding wildness concerning water, which is to be kept and cherished but never harnessed or controlled (Dennis & Bell, 2020; Kimmerer, 2013; Strang, 2019).

There is so much I have learned about water. It is both relational and reciprocal and yet I realize that there is still so much I do not fully comprehend. Snyder (1990/2020) enters the conversation on wildness and water by inviting us into the wild:

There is nothing like stepping away from the road and heading into a new part of the watershed. Not for the sake of newness, but for the sense of coming home to our whole terrain. “Off the trail” is another name for the Way, and sauntering off the trail is the practice of the wild. That is also where—paradoxically—we do our best work. But we need paths and trails and will always be maintaining them. You first must be on the path, before you can turn and walk into the wild. (p. 165)

Part of the tension I have experienced regarding wildness is in how the Regional District of the Central Okanagan has forced the creek into a confined and narrow pathway and suppressed its unfettered journey to Okanagan Lake (Matthews, 2022). Concrete and rock paths have been made and are frequently maintained by park staff. However, if a flood occurs, it seems the park staff’s priorities run to maintaining man-made structures surrounding creek. Trees are cut down so berms can be built, and trails are more easily maintained. As an autophenomenologist, I also can relate to how modern efficiencies and cultural norms and some of the obstacles I have placed in my own unfettered way have narrowed my channels and potential pathways of creativity. Like the creek, how I live, pursue wellbeing, the questions that I ask, and my values have been limited or deprioritized at times too.

This constriction and disregard I have unconsciously placed on my natural ways of being, I believe, has, in part, led to a sense of loss and has parched parts of my essence already disconnected through the malaise of modernity and all its trappings. For example, can one be wild while walking in an urban city (Abram, 2010)? As Gary Snyder (1990/2020) says, “Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon swimming upstream with us, as we stroll a city street” (p. 101). Do I embody this level of wildness? Am I conscious of wildness and its various forms?



What does it feel like in my body when I wane from wildness? In modern-day life, have I lost my wild ways? Is wild river nature inviting me to reimagine wildness and live it anew?

### **Conclusions: The Estuary**

Having spent considerable time in relationship with creek, the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) that urge us “to go like a river” stand out in vivid resonance and I hope will act as a guide for all my days. If I had not followed the currents of this research and physically gone to the river while also writing and reflecting, if I had only read and theorized, then there would have been significant gaps in my embodied understanding of creek, rock, myself, and the ways other authors cited in this research like Thich Nhat Hanh (1993; 2002; 2010) delved into this type of inquiry too. I believe I still would have found the metaphor of “going as a river” to be meaningful and carrying weight, however I think I would have missed out on the vaster encompassing felt sense of those words. The potency would have been lost in language alone, staying in my head rather than permeating my whole being through the resonance of embodied writing experience.

### **Ripples of Time**

Within phenomenological philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) writes of the relationship between consciousness and perceptions of water. Regarding time and rivers for example, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) phenomenologically explores how water and time are erroneously viewed and connected as linear, noting how some view water, like time, flowing in one direction from then until now or into the future. He notes how, in using a metaphor like this, humans “surreptitiously place [themselves] in the river, a witness to its flowing” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 434). In the now, shaped by Merleau-Ponty's studies on temporality, I begin to see a tapestry forming that links the river, understandings of embodiment, and the way I have begun to perceive the flow of time.

Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) exploration of time and water, emphasizes the profound interplay between perception, embodiment, and temporality. Like a river, flowing water demonstrates how the human experience of time is intricately connected to our encounters with the world. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, time is not an abstract and detached concept but instead finds its embodiment in our sensory engagement with the continuous movement of water. Hence, he views human perception of time as inseparable from our bodily experiences. For example, when I interact with water, like putting my hand in creek, my perception of time is intimately intertwined with the sensory feedback from my body. Water's flow and bodily sensations coalesce to shape my perception of time. Merleau-Ponty's profundity bears repeating in that in the world, components of the future and past for each of us are already here. Time perceived in this way is a noteworthy finding, as it demonstrates that time is not an isolated concept; instead, it is genuinely experienced and lived through *my* embodied interaction with the world in the now.

Regarding wellbeing and being witness, I believe acting on behalf of life (manifesting, actioning) instead of just observing can catalyze new potentials for healing, health, and wholeness too. If I am witness to the river's flowing (an observer), I could hop into a boat and let creek's current take me to the lake (my future), but Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) writes, "the future is in those new landscapes that await him at the estuary, and the flow of time is no longer the stream itself, but is rather the unfolding of the landscapes for the moving observer" (p. 434). Building on this sense of an unfolding future, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) makes the case that:

...time is neither a real process nor an actual succession...It is born of my relation with things. In the things themselves, the future and the past are a sort of eternal pre-existence

or afterlife; the water that will pass by tomorrow is currently at the source, the water that has just past by is now a bit further down into the valley. Whatever is past or future for me is present in the world. (p. 434)

Therefore, if I follow that line of thinking, an apparent link between my current and future self can be sensed in the present moment of wellbeing, through my attunement to the landscape/waterscape around me in the now, all time being relative. Linking myself in dynamic time is a complex process: I am part of the landscapes, and the landscapes are a part of me, willing and ready to go together. Hence, go as a river. Layering deeper, Thich Nhat Hahn's noticings connect to Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) emphasis that beyond simply flowing through linear life—even sitting stationary, or through dreams (Bachelard, 1983; Hillman, 1997; Plotkin, 2003)—the river can wash over me, the landscapes evolve and wrap themselves around me, and I am simultaneously transformed and welcomed into the more authentic and wild version of myself (Blackie, 2016; Chödrön, 2017; Ensler, 2013; Hillman, 1997; Pinkola-Estés, 1997; Plotkin, 2010)...I am becoming.

### **Body Dancing with Creek**

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) underscores that our bodily actions and movements—such as my putting a hand in creek, or swimming, possesses inherent temporal rhythms, further reinforcing the idea that time is a fundamental aspect of our conscious experience and perception of water. When I put my hand in creek, it did not just stay stationary; it moved with the currents. I moved my hand in circles without thinking because I wanted to feel and notice more of creek's movements; I wanted to express or relate more with creek and, in a sense, dance and bond with water. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) exploration of water and time challenges

traditional understandings of time as an abstract and detached entity, emphasizing its deep entanglement with our embodied existence and sensory engagement with the world.

Past and future exist in the present. "Time is not a line, but rather a network of intentionalities" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 440). Viewing multiple facets of intentionality, we can see that presence (Chödrön, 2017; Nhat Hanh, 1993; Weber, 2019). This requires internal and external choosing, as well as it holds potential (e.g., the seeds of potent essence present in each of us) (Bachelard, 1983; Hillman, 1997; Kimmerer, 2013; Plotkin, 2021) and can help to bring tangible and healing relevance to what it means to be well.

### **Creek and Land: Potent Medicine Teachers**

Creek, and time in its presence, opened a portal that felt as though it was meant just for me whereby seeds within me were permitted the space and time to infuse with my innate potential, my eco-niche for the world, revealed.

Creek has assisted me in cultivating a greater awareness and consciousness of my bodily sensations as they linked to and conversed with nature's movements and presence. In communicating about this wild way of being, I hope that in future I might convey some of the nuances of this experience as an invitation for other people to experience a kind of reciprocal affection from creek for themselves.

In bonding with the land, I did not know how this process would shape me or what would change within me as I went about being with and writing down and reflecting upon my experiences. My relationship with the land created within me a greater awareness of the deep connections between the body of the world and my personal embodied sensations; a nearly impossible experience of where I end and where world begins. There is still so much I cannot

express in words. However, I will continue being shaped by these moments of bonding and responding to what nature communicates as I continue finding words or felt expressions for these new portals of embodied awareness that have opened and as I show up, listen, tell what I have found.

### **At Home in the World**

Another significant and somewhat surprising finding was when I realized that I am okay and can be at peace, even if the environments around me are in chaos—literally and metaphorically. Structures do not wholly contain what I perceive now to be my home as I once imagined, which is true for not only buildings but metaphorical societal structures too—or more insidiously my own internal constricting structures and beliefs (Hillman, 1997; Plotkin, 2010). My sense of home has broadened. From a micro view, now I think of home as the cells of my body, and the homes (whether organs, blood vessels, or synapses) these cells find themselves in. From a macro view, I think of my being in the world as home and the alchemy of my essence with the essences of all sentient beings in the universe, all that is beyond my own human consciousness as home-making.

### **The Chronology of Water and Time**

Regarding notions of consciousness, the more time I spent with water, the more my conscious relationship with time changed. If this study was rushed, or if I had not spent as much time by creek or reflecting through writing after being at creek, my findings would have felt much shallower and heady. Allowing and inviting spaciousness and dipping into time's multidimensionality meant that water showed up in my dreams, in random thoughts throughout the day, or flowed into the present moment more.

I might have gone to creek at one moment in time, but that moment revisited me, in my body, dreams, a smell, a song, or spontaneous thought. I felt as if I was submerged in all things water. These processes were all part of enabling the encounter of flow, the kind of flow that goes as a river. Here, I also could see and feel more clearly just how wild the confluence of water and wellbeing could be.

### **Choices From Being in Relationship**

When pondering what was to come, I had anticipated there would be a co-creative experience with creek that may have even exceeded the limitations of this study. I expected significant discoveries to emerge and crystalize for me.

Now, in answer to my second research question, after completing this study, there is a pull within me to teach others about this work, or at the very least, I anticipate further future opportunities arising for sharing these approaches and practices. Perhaps this work may offer pedagogical possibilities for teachers and communicators via environmental education and communication conferences where I might present or within collegial discussions with peers and colleagues.

While my primary goal was always an autophenomenological one—to humbly deepen my relationship with water and wellbeing and in turn to become more ecological by identity—I sincerely hoped that I would be able to do justice to and give voice to what Mission Creek intended to share, and what the other inhabitants at the creek might have also shared as I became both researcher and research site and let this researching pour through me (Leighton, 2014, p. 9).

I know now that as long as I live, life experiences will continually impact my relationship with water and wellbeing. To me, living a more natural life—a life lived embodying my

ecological identity—speaks of being in uninhibited flow and the potential for becoming wilder. This will require me to be responsible for myself while having compassion and integrity, acknowledging the uninhibited and formal expression-rich beauty of life (Snyder, 1990/2020). And I know, I have choices about how I consciously react or interact/respond with the living world around me. Acts of reciprocity and presence will significantly influence how (and if) I embody wellbeing and will require that I am especially attuned to and with other beings I encounter within the larger wild world.

### **Surprised by Fire**

When I first began my research, I did not expect fire to be so prevalent and significant to this research. The fires had such a magnitude that I was concerned their phenomena would overshadow or consume critical questions that I had about embodiment and wellbeing in general. What I had imagined to be a relatively peaceful research autophenomenographical experience began full of tension, gloom, and brought to bear an urgent and complex situation. But fire made all the difference...

In this short time by creek, I could not thread my experience into a more prominent myth-story yet, other than general “dimensions both sacred and present” (Hogan, 2007, p. 12). However, mythical threads have entered this thesis and given more time, may yet embroider a larger story for me to live and tell.

Pinkola-Estés (1997) points out that there is a fear that I may be led astray or even duped into believing I am satisfied with what is in front of me given the bounty of what the modern technologically inclined world presents. The call I have heard is one where I must look beyond the smorgasbord of modern allurements and convenience and use my imagination to discover



what breaks my heart (open) and makes my heart sing (Bachelard, 1983), what resonates for me. In moments like this, creativity and curiosity inoculate me against the sedation-marinating status quo, leaving me alert to the wild I had formerly overlooked.

### **Patterns**

Warm patterns emerged from this collection of warm subjective data (Bateson, 2017) through prominent themes, repeat patterns, and complex findings. The first noticeable theme was how urgency will come and go, yet seasonality persists. Multiple unexpected fires created feelings of urgency and immense grief in my community while I was journaling by creek in late summer. Perennially, next year, summer will still come around, but the sense of urgency may be diminished compared to what I experienced this year. Seasons consistently cycle from summer to fall, winter, spring, and summer again, yet the experiences within each season arrive anew. Secondly, repeat patterns of life-death-rebirth emerged as life constantly flowed, and this was especially noticeable in the natural environment. Some of my embodied perspectives expanded while others died off as I went about this research, just as the salmon come to spawn in the fall and then pass on once their eggs are laid in their birthplace. Third, being in nature, participating with nature through acts of gratitude and focused attention (Appendix B), honouring inner body experiences as well as outer body experiences, and noticing how those contributed to an increased sense of wellbeing, is critical, is the real research found here.

### **In Consideration of Water**

Water has shifted my ability to communicate with my own body and other water bodies around me. There is a genuine sense that I am in creek, but creek's qualities are also in me in a physical, imaginal, mythical, and profoundly physiological ways. I am maturing more into my

true essence because of this newfound bond with nature foraged by spending time with, in, and around creek (Plotkin, 2010).

### **In Consideration of Wellbeing**

The ways in which I communicate wellbeing are expanding. If one pictures an imaginal confluence of a river, I am that same sense of confluence with ducks, birds, fish, rocks, and water. I am expanding my sense and understanding of my wellbeing beyond myself to include the systems and living organisms around and beyond me. Fire taught me much about wellbeing while I sat at creek's edge. Fire's presence showed me that I am only a partial story. Others are needed to make me more whole, or expand my sense of wellbeing and wholeness. We are all from the same stream: the same watery source or life force. The channels may be different, and the confluences we travel may differ in form, colour, intensity, and duration, but they are all made of the same elements. The older I become, the more confluences (choices, lived experiences, awareness of synaesthetic experiences and perceptions) I hope to engage with and appreciate.

### **In Consideration of Self**

This research has shaped my ability to communicate with myself and I hope deepened my communication skills with other beings by cultivating a constant and flowing conversation rather than stop-and-start, occurring only when I was perched to listen. In selecting the word choices for these pages, I felt I was true to Anderson's (2001) seven distinct elements of embodied writing. I sense that as my awareness has expanded, so too has the validity of this writing as synaesthetic experiences are much richer than they were when first beginning this research. I am

more attuned with my body, and perhaps with the larger body of Earth as well, because a consideration of self is also consideration of the world.

### **Ecology of Self**

The creek of “smoothing stones” has stretched my perceptions of life's inherent complexity, uniqueness, and variegated forms. After my time with creek, I sense that I am intrinsically linked with life forms and places around me which have expanded my ecological sense of self beyond my physical confines. As Naess (2005) wrote, “The requisite care flows naturally if the “self” is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves (p. 527). The grandeur of water and wellbeing that enlivens Earth offers assurance that I too am infused with this gift which is much larger and more significant than I once realized: “The river is immense, and it has the capacity to receive, embrace, and transform” (Nhat Hanh, 2002, p. ix). The interdependence experienced here was beyond my comprehension and beyond my own sense of self yet continues to inform my sense of self in expanding ways as I walk to the river’s edge, dip my cupped hands in this enlivening liquid, and drink from this wellspring, remembering to go as a river.

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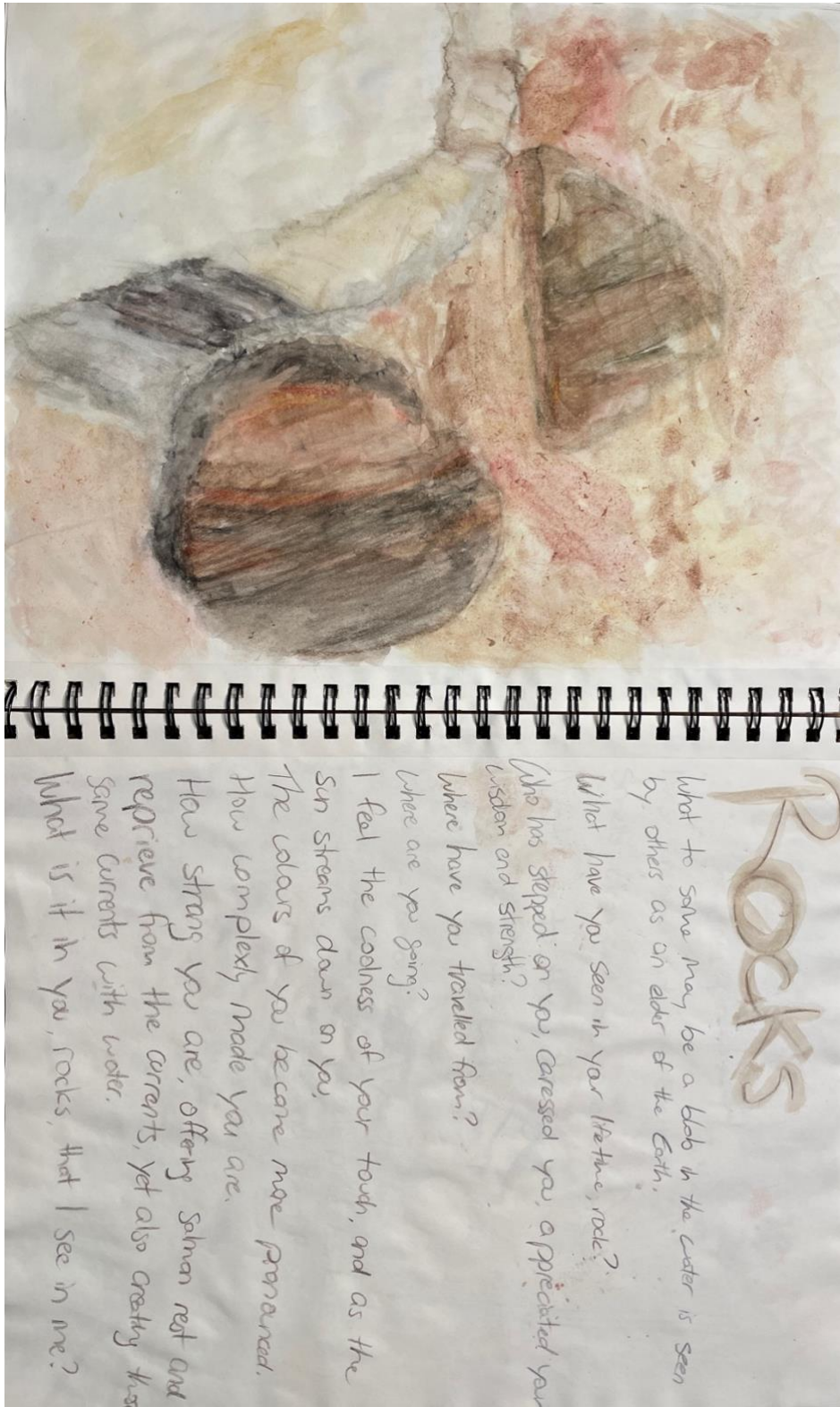
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Appendix A





## Appendix B

water  
 The more you are seen, the more your flow is celebrated.  
 water  
 Today you are bursting forth after the rains of the last few days and  
 the sun that has shown itself more and more since the thunder and lightning  
 and down pours have stopped.  
 water  
 I long to be caught up in your rhythms. To draw strength from you, to  
 let my tears and grief and emotions fall into and be cleansed and glorified by  
 you.  
 water  
 Thank you for how much you metaphorically speak to me, embrace, cover,  
 and overflow within and around me. Your unhindered movements — and the  
 magnificence of your face — speak to me even when I am not sitting by  
 your side. Your sounds, movements, and smells are inspiring to others.  
 water  
 You are the definition of goodness. You are what creates the apples and the cereals.  
 You are sustenance for all living beings. You are life in the simplest of forms. You  
 are wholeness and health and wellbeing. A mother as you represent what it is  
 and means and signifies to be in this world well. You make your mark for within  
 my body to the furthest reaches of Mother Earth's body. You are remembered.