Towards the integration of nature into art therapy:
A heuristic exploration of an ecological context for creative experience.

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ABSTRACT

Towards the integration of nature into art therapy: A heuristic exploration of an ecological context for creative expression.

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Historically, there has been a disturbing absence of nature in the field of psychotherapy. Up until now, much of the helping professions have adopted a primarily self-centered approach to healing, with little emphasis placed upon our relationship to the Earth. This absence of an ecological sensibility is also present in the field of the creative arts therapies, as the connection between art and nature has rarely been made explicit or applied in clinical practice. However, there is evidence to suggest that the field of psychotherapy, and specifically art therapy, is beginning to adopt such an awareness, and being enriched in the process. This paper is an examination of how art therapy might benefit from adopting an ecological context for clinical practice and research. A heuristic research design is used to examine the researcher's experience of nature through reviewing pertinent literature, presenting personal creative responses, and speculating on possible therapeutic implications of findings. Findings include an increased awareness of nature as embodying multiple contradictions--enabling the researcher to better tolerate personally felt inner contradictions. These realizations are discussed as fostering an increased sense of authenticity in both personal creative pursuits and clinical practice. Suggestions for applications of an ecological context in the practice of art therapy are offered in the context of Winnicott's theory of object relations and the intermediate realm, and questions raised with regards to future directions for research and practice.

I wish to extend thanks to all those who have contributed to the realization of this research project. To Elizabeth Anthony for her guidance, insight and committed critical eye as my research advisor. To Martin Gauthier for his humor, genuineness and dedication as a friend and mentor. To all my family, friends and classmates for their support and encouragement. And with gratitude to the Earth, who reveals to me daily that above all, nature persists.

Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate Earth; our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other *eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact and conviviality with what is not human. Only in reciprocity with what is Other do we begin to heal ourselves.*

-David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

We cannot exist in isolation. No living creature does. For us, the very moment of conception marks the beginning of a relationship—a relationship with our mother's body—the body that nourishes us for nine months before pushing us out into the world. In this way, our experience of the womb provides us with our very first experience of connectedness--an experience of connectedness that not only brings us into being, but also provides a template for future growth and development. Hence, from this moment on, we are inextricably linked to our environment, and destined to build a world based on relationships with other living entities around us. From this moment on, we exist in relation to all other beings.

Looking at the history of psychology, there is a disturbing absence of such a relational worldview. Across many models, the individual psyche is placed as paramount above all other considerations. Psychoanalysis, cognitive behavioral therapies, humanistic and existential psychologies have all placed an emphasis on the inner workings, associations, and schemas of the individual mind (Conn, 1995, Devereux, 1996, Roszak, 1992). The creative arts therapies show a similar bias. As creative arts therapists, we aim to help our clients explore and express their inner imagery, to bring their life stories into symbolic form. But where is the larger environment in this? Who is asking about the *earthly* context of our inner workings? Why do we hesitate to discuss the impact of environmental degradation, poilution, deforestation on our mental and physical health? And what will it take for us to turn our attention to nature—acknowledging it as a potent and powerful resource for healing?

Focused attention on the individual psyche and the therapeutic alliance between client and therapist have been shown by many researchers to be of central importance in the practice and effectiveness of psychotherapy (Safran & Muran, 2000). However, as the reality of environmental degradation, pollution and destruction continues to infiltrate our psyches, a shift from a primarily individualistic view of the world to a paradigm that acknowledges our deep interconnectedness to the natural world as not only a source of disease, but of solace and healing has become more pressing. Furthermore, the prevalence of depression, disillusionment and other illnesses of emptiness seem to suggest that the individualistic bias that has governed the field of psychotherapy up until now is not enough. A perceptual change--one that acknowledges our place as part of the natural world--is needed. And it is needed now.

The field of art therapy presents an interesting context for this perceptual shift. For centuries nature has figured prominently in artistic endeavors, inspiring poems, paintings, inventions and innovations. The role of art as rooted deeply in the natural world can be seen and felt in aboriginal, native and first nations cultures throughout the world. Their reverence and respect for nature is the cornerstone of daily life; in such cultures, art, nature and healing are viewed as part of the great whole of life—they are inseparable (Devereux, 1996, Leroux, 1994). Accordingly, despite the onset of modernism and incessant technological advances in contemporary society, there remain many artists who continue to use nature as inspiration, subject matter and material in their creative pursuits. Hence, even amidst the onslaught of postmodern and contemporary art, nature persists (Gablik, 1998).

It follows then, that if we choose to pay attention to the role of the natural world in the creation of art, and if we choose to see the field of art therapy as deeply rooted in the tradition of art-making, then it becomes possible to extend our concept of art therapy to include the natural world as a context for creative experience. Furthermore, we must also include *imagination* in this discussion of an ecological context for creative experience. Art therapy employs the imagination as a primary healing force, and in doing so, seems especially well-placed to not only re-vision, but to put into practice a more integrated model of healing; one that combines our imaginative capacities with a respect for our place in the natural world.

Over the course of this paper, I document my research process, attempt to uncover some insight into my relationship with nature, consider the experience of connectedness, and speculate upon potential therapeutic implications for the creative arts therapies as a whole. More specifically, the purpose of my research has been to deepen my experience and understanding of nature in hopes of being able to apply it in my work as an art therapist. As therapists, it is known, and very much felt, that we bring who we are to every therapeutic encounter (Epstein, 1998, Rubin, 1987, Weiner, 1998); I've always felt nature to be a fundamental part of who I am. Consequently, my logic resides in the belief that in getting to know nature (through my experience in it, and my own creative responses), I get to know myself. And in getting to know myself, I am better positioned to be an effective therapist. Furthermore, I hope that my own personal experience might inform personal reflections on possible implications for future research and practice in the field of psychotherapy. Thus said, this research has been a process of locating myself, so as to have a point of departure for helping others.

Heuristic inquiry

My own desire to investigate nature in a deeper way led me to a model of qualitative research known as "heuristic inquiry". Heuristic research has been described as an "exhaustive self-search" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40), in which the researcher makes "an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self" (p. 39). It is a model of qualitative research that demands the participation and immersion of the researcher in the experience itself. Unlike other forms of qualitative research, heuristic research demands that the researcher "must have experienced what is under investigation and include himself or herself throughout the study" (Bloomgarden, 1998, p. 52). Hence, it is unique in that is calls intimately upon the person of the researcher to explore her own feelings, values and experience in the interest of research. Furthermore, as with most research models, it demands that the researcher maintain an attitude of openness and curiosity, and a willingness to surrender and alter pre-conceived beliefs and value systems throughout the process.

Moustakas (1990) offers a six-phase model of heuristic research, as based on the three-phase model originally outlined by Douglass & Moustakas (1985). According to Moustakas (1990), the first stage of the heuristic process is *initial engagement.* Initial engagement is the stage of first connecting with the subject matter. It may take place well before the formalized research study begins, and often presents itself as an area of intense interest, rooted in a researcher's own life experience. It involves processes such as *self-dialogue* during which time the researcher consults herself, establishes this area of passionate interest, makes a commitment to study it, and ultimately affirms the value of

her own subjective experience. At this point, a personal connection to the research subject is established

The second stage of heuristic inquiry is *immersion.* Immersion takes place once the initial area of interest has been established. At this point, one's life seems to revolve around the topic in question. Every experience suddenly becomes relevant, propelling the researcher in various and sometimes contradictory directions. At this time, the researcher is led by her own perceptions and awareness—disregarding conformity and surrendering the need for congruence, while striving to stay true to her own impressions and inner sensations. Hence, the stage of immersion is characterized by formless wandering, a sense of lostness, letting go, and surrender to the thing itself (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). *Indwelling* is one component of the immersion phase, whereby the researcher may pause to explore an image or sensation more deeply. The softening of perception that takes places in these moments of indwelling yields a deeper level of understanding, otherwise described as *tacit knowing* (Polanyi, 1967). This tacit dimension refers to that which is not yet explainable, but is deeply felt. Douglass and Moustakas (1985) suggest that tacit knowing "operates behind the scenes, giving birth to the hunches and vague, formless insights that characterize heuristic discovery" (p. 49). Tacit knowing sows the seeds of intuition, allowing us to enter into a sensate dimension of subjective knowing.

Incubation is the third phase of heuristic study. It refers to times in the process where the researcher steps back from intense and focused study of the topic at hand. This is a crucial part of the process as it allows the researcher to oscillate her attention to other aspects of life, providing respite from deep and concentrated immersion in the research

topic. This retreat may involve play, rest, and time spent in activities unrelated to the research. Such periods of incubation are essential in heuristic research, just as they are throughout the creative process, and it is often these periods of rest that supply the researcher with new insights and heightened levels of awareness.

The fourth phase is *illumination.* Illumination is the "aha" moment in research. It is often felt as a moment of creative breakthrough, and of new understanding. It provides a sudden felt insight into the phenomenon in question, expanding the scope of the research or perhaps demanding that the researcher modify prior assumptions or old understandings.

Moustakas (1990) names the fifth phase as that of *explication*, whereby the researcher returns again to the phenomenon or data with a scrutinizing eye—ensuring consistency and validity, and asking whether the original data matches the description given up to this point. This concentrated re-visiting of the data is intended to prepare the researcher for the *creative synthesis,* which comprises the last stage of the heuristic inquiry. As described by Bloomgarden (1998), the stage of creative synthesis "is a discovery on its own. It draws on the data but does not aim at summarizing... It constitutes its own and new reality" (p. 53). Furthermore, Moustakas (1990) suggests that this final synthesis may take the form of a creative product, such as a poem or a painting.

In reviewing these phases of heuristic research, it is important to remember that these stages are not intended to proceed in a linear fashion. The heuristic process is organic and non-linear by nature. It is more of an attitude than a set of procedural rules, as any strict methodology would contradict the inherent nature of heuristic research as

emergent, spontaneous and intuitively driven. This "intuitive" process raises issues of validity in research due to the absence of strict methodological constraints or objective measures. Other limitations of this research include the inherent flexibility and spontaneity within the heuristic process—which does not allow for replication by other researchers. In the context of validity, the role of self-discipline in heuristic research is raised by Douglass & Moustakas (1985). They suggest that "passionate yet disciplined commitment is vital if the search is to attain scientific credibility" (p. 40). Hence, they emphasize that the subjective experience of heuristic research must be balanced also by its demand for disciplined commitment to the inquiry. Bloomgarden (1998) suggests that heuristic research in the field of art therapy is both useful and valid as it engages the researcher's creative faculties—this same creativity that is "inherent to art therapy as a treatment modality" (p. 53). Furthermore, Bloomgarden (1998) states that "conducting qualitative research can be a form of strengthening confidence in the validity, applicability, and effectiveness of following intuitive and tacit knowledge in work with clients" (p. 51). In the context of psychotherapy and the therapeutic alliance, Safran (2000) also highlights the "intuitive and creative aspects" of therapeutic skill, and offers literature demonstrating how "highly skilled practitioners across a range of fields respond to relevant situations in a flexible, creative, and contextually sensitive fashion" (p. 4). Hence, it appears that the flexibility and creativity inherent in heuristic inquiry present the researcher with a unique opportunity to also develop and apply these skills for use in a clinical setting.

I agree that the disciplined pursuit of essential meaning in the heuristic process is a cornerstone of what makes it a valid form of research, however I found that the lack of

any strict methodology offered a sometimes tempting opportunity to indulge personal biases and further entrench passionate belief systems. At times it became difficult to drag myself out of my own deeply rooted biases and be critical of the topic at hand; and because I alone am the sole participant in this research inquiry, having no clients or colleagues as "co-researchers", the process at times became insular and isolating.

Patton (1990) offers some insight into the issue of one's credibility as a researcher, as he suggests that ultimately, "humility can do more than certainty to enhance credibility" (p. 464). He suggests that researchers who deal openly with the complexities and dilemmas posed by unexpected findings in research will be greeted with less skepticism than those who present perfect patterns and tidy explanations. Accordingly, I hope to present both my revelations and hesitations in this process, and to offer a transparent view of my own subjective experience, while being careful not to generalize beyond my own experience.

Keeping in mind the limitations presented by this form of inquiry, I found heuristic research to have provided a useful framework for examining my experience of nature in a more committed, systematic and studied way, while allowing me to incorporate my creative process as an intrinsic part of this investigation. Furthermore, within this heuristic framework there is an emphasis on connectedness, organicism and relationship (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985)—all of which are prominent themes in my research topic. Finally, despite the temptation to over-indulge my own biases at times, I found that the process of using my own experience as the substance of my research took on a feeling of authenticity that it could not have otherwise. Heuristic research is a framework that affirms the value of my own subjective experience. And this framework

has acted as a valuable reminder that I hope to translate into my work with clients, as I endeavor to encourage and affirm the value of each individual's own subjective, and creative experience in the therapeutic setting.

The research question

For the purpose of this research inquiry, my primary research question was: how might the practice of art therapy benefit from adopting an ecological context for clinical work? I chose to keep this investigation broad, and as a result, an "ecological context" is defined as a mode of perception that sees, above all, the interconnectedness of all life forms. It honors diversity while also acknowledging commonality. In the practice of art therapy, this ecological context may range across many levels of engagement with nature—from pure discussion of environmental issues, to views of nature, to experience with natural materials in a studio setting, to direct immersion in a natural setting through guided wilderness experience. Subsidiary research questions include: how might the creative process differ across various levels of engagement with nature? And how might these various levels of engagement with nature influence different populations, settings, and therapeutic applications?

Chapter outline

I have divided this paper into six chapters: Introduction, The research journey, Literature review, The creative process, Emergent themes, and Future directions. In the Introduction (Chapter 1), I focus on how my own life experience generated ideas for this proposal, and acted as the catalyst for this investigation. In Chapter 2, I discuss my research process in more detail, while providing an outline of the conceptual frameworks I have chosen for this research paper. I present the literature review (Chapter 3) after my

research process, so as to keep my experience fresh and avoid introducing theory until after the experience is shared. This review of the literature is intended to offer the reader a broad overview of past and current research across related fields of art therapy, ecopsychology, psychology, education and the fine arts. Further literature is also introduced throughout the paper as it pertains to emergent themes and experiences. Chapter 4 is a discussion of my creative process, and in it, I present the artwork that came out of these periods of creative immersion. Chapter 5 highlights emergent themes that arose during my own heuristic process. Finally, the sixth and last chapter discusses the implications of these findings for the theory and practice of art therapy, and offers suggestions for future directions. References are provided at the end of the paper, as well as an appendix, which includes other relevant sources and avenues for further exploration.

Chapter 2

The research journey

The roots of my research

My research began as a vague tug in my gut, and the journey through it has taken many shapes. As suggested by Moustakas (1990), my "initial engagement" with the topic has its roots in my own personal experience. More specifically, I feel I began my formalized research process in deepening this period of "initial engagement" when I moved to Montreal from Alberta to pursue graduate studies in art therapy. Nature has always figured prominently in my experience, but as seems often to be the case, I failed to appreciate it until it was taken away. And moving from a place where I had easy access to nature, where I had become intimate with the landscape, where I felt "at home", inevitably caused some upheaval for me. But it was beyond the expected growing pains that accompany any transition. Upon arriving in this new, urban landscape, I felt despair, isolation and loss. The absence of clear blue skies was striking. I couldn't see the landscape I knew and loved, and suddenly, I couldn't even see myself. At this time, my relationship with my environment underwent a drastic change. I felt alienated from nature and became increasingly passionate about uncovering why.

As I became immersed in a new life and urban context for living, issues that would later become the source of my research topic began to take shape. I cursed the city, while idealizing the natural environment I had known in Alberta. All things natural had become good to me, while anything urban represented oppression, rigidity, ugliness, anger. From this distance, I could only see nature as good, city as bad. I felt overwhelmed by the foreignness of this new place, its many shadows, its absence of light.

It is striking now, to notice how the frigid winters and ruthless wind of the prairies receded from my memory as I chose to remember only the space and beauty of the places I had called home. In turn, this new city left me feeling lost.

I can see now that this self-searching and physical lostness in a new city and landscape serve as powerful metaphors for the research process I would take on later that year. As the result of my physical relocation, I had lost the landmarks I once knew. Hence, this physical move became a tangible metaphor for my heuristic inquiry that followed—a process during which I often felt my inner landmarks, those beliefs and assumptions I had held on to tightly, slipping away. In this way, my initial introduction to Montreal became a metaphor for the research process I would engage in for the next two years. As it happened, my arrival in the city acted as an unwanted, yet much-needed catalyst for a deeper examination of my relationship to the natural world. Being in this intensely urban environment challenged my assumptions about nature, and forced me to probe more deeply into the environment I had, up until now, taken for granted. Accordingly, what has felt at times like a futile quest for Mother Nature, has also become a crucial journey through which I've emerged with a multitude of questions—mostly without answers. This process has challenged me to differentiate between assumptions and answers; and to accept the richness of my questions as ultimately more valid than uncovering the answer.

Early beginnings: childhood experience

Tracing the roots of my research journey, I am led back to my earliest childhood experiences of nature. For me, these early memories are rich with rocks and riverbeds, mountain slopes and sappy pinecones, sparrows, worms and wild strawberries. These

sensory memories and chunks of the material world comprised the "facts" of my experience (Hanson, 1969, quoted in Chambers, 1984). Hence, from this early experience, I built my perception of the world. (This early sensory experience shifted most notably once I moved to Montreal, and began to incorporate streets and sirens as part of my everyday life in graduate school.)

It is well documented that early experience determines the wiring of our brains in adulthood (Caldwell, 2002; Sewall, 1998; 1999, Roberts; 1998). According to Sewall (1998), our experience of seeing, or *what* we look at, shapes the development of our neural networks and hence, our worldview. This could also extend to the shaping of our *imaginations*. In this way, the more we are taught to notice, and consciously attend to, the relationships in our natural environment, the more we reinforce the neural pathways responsible for generating our ability to perceive the relationships between all things in the world. Feral (1998) suggests that early experience in nature allows children to develop empathy, as it provides them with a model of connectedness, a perception of depth, and a sense of hope, responsibility and belonging. Chambers (1984) suggests that "we cling to our understanding of nature because from earliest childhood we are taught the formulae which will eventually structure our thought processes and determine our seeing" (p. 51). Interestingly, Tuan (1978) proposes that children's natural curiosity about nature is easily lost if it is not nurtured by adults. He also cites *play* as crucial in a child's development—as it fosters a meaningful connection between child and the landscape, and encourages children to view nature as animate, sentient and feeling. Hence, early experience is crucial in shaping our view of the world, as it provides the sensory data—the raw material—for building our inner imaginative realms. And for

children like me, who have had the luxury of being exposed to nature at an early age, it could be said that our imaginations are enlivened and become richly inhabited by the sights, smells, shapes and textures of the natural world. Comparatively, children who are not exposed to nature in such a safe and creative context at an early age may develop a much different perception of nature, as shaped by their personal experience. For some children, nature figures very little into early development, as an urban existence may be what is familiar, safe and soothing.

As I child, I was encouraged to get curious about my environment—I grew up in a safe neighborhood, rich with natural play spaces and freedom to explore. My introduction to the wilderness came at a young age on father-daughter camping trips. My experience in nature continued throughout my adolescence and early adulthood, as I spent much time outdoors—camping, skiing, hiking, biking and drawing. Mind you, it wasn't always the most 'natural' thing for me to do. It took some time before I could tolerate the grit of sand between my toes, or dredge up the courage to touch the slimy starfish that my sister delighted in dragging out of tide pools. At the same time, making art was always an instinctual response for me while in nature. It provided me with both an intimacy, and a satisfying distance from which to relate to the sensuous environment around me (without getting too dirty!). Throughout this time, as my creative skills developed, so did my appreciation for nature. Making art acted as an intermediary between my self and my natural surroundings. And so, it was through my early paintings and drawings that I built an intimate relationship with nature—the forms, shapes and textures I studied infiltrated my being to the point of becoming intimately familiar to me. Art was often the product of periods of informal "indwelling"—acting as a medium

through which to grasp or experience a subject at hand more deeply. To this day, these shapes inhabit and enliven my imagination, while the natural world still remains the primary source of inspiration for my artwork. Nature, for me, is a catalyst for creation. And to this day, whether I am drawing from observation or from a spontaneous creative impulse, nature presents itself.

There did finally come a time when I became less concerned about the grit between my toes, and delighted in picking the bark out of my drinking water while on backcountry hikes. I began to cherish the simplicity and sensuous experience of immersing myself in the 'wilderness' for days on end. Getting dirty mattered much less, and my experience *in* nature began to take on new depth, as did my creative connection to it. My art expanded to become less representational, and more expressive—I began to recognize an inner core in these abstract responses to a felt experience in nature (Image 1; completed November, 1999). My passion for the outdoors fueled my living. I attended wilderness retreats and painted outdoors for the first time (Image 2). For me, the artwork that came out of this period felt raw and unencumbered. I taught children about the local landscape, brought them outdoors to sketch the foothills, gathered wild strawberries and carded raw wool to weave into willow boughs. Nature provided an abundance of creative opportunity, and I felt energized and alive amidst it. Map-making, cairn building, canoe tipping and animal tracking all offered various versions of getting connected to the natural environment—through education and especially through play. I considered myself as part of the natural world around me.

Image 1

Image 2

An urban existence

Needless to say, when the time came for me to pursue graduate studies in a busy, urban, inner city environment, I was left fearing that I had lost the source of what I had grown up loving. Nature. What would I do without the gentle breeze of early spring wind through groves of aspen trees? The glimmer of late day sunlight on lakes seemed suddenly a distant memory, as did my recent late-summer hike amidst freshly uprooted trees—recent evidence of a large grizzly's search for food. The question begged asking: how well could I adjust to living amidst this new urban environment? I felt no resonance with concrete streets and cement walls. I recognized little from what I had come to know as my version of reality.

Formalizing the investigation: from life experience to research

My proposal for research grew out of my inner struggle with this urban environment I found myself in. Initial engagement with the topic gave way to periods of immersion, during which there was much self-dialogue and inner consultation. I wrote and drew, walked and talked, consulted friends and therapists. As I wrestled with the absence of nature I felt in my daily urban life, I also struggled with the absence of an environmental, and specifically, *ecological* context for the work I was doing with clients as an art therapy intern. Questions arose. I wondered how many of the children I saw had ever visited a farm, experienced the wilderness, or seen a wild animal in their natural habitat. I ached with a deeply felt absence— and later realized that the compassion I had developed for the earth through my personal experience with it, was also at the core of my own felt experience of suffering with it (Macy, 1995). Furthermore, my own creative impulse felt stagnant as I began to feel the impact of environmental degradation more

deeply. Cars and concrete, pollution and litter reminded me daily of our dying planet. In Alberta there were fewer daily reminders of the damage we, as a human species, are doing to the earth. Yet in Montreal, I felt confronted by it to varying degrees almost every day. So these strong feelings of despair and of love for the natural world propelled me on my research path.

In developing my research proposal, I began with trepidation -- is the concept of "nature" a legitimate topic for a paper in art therapy? How can I make it fit into the prescribed requirements of the program? Will my idea be accepted? Rejected? Do I want to take responsibility for this? Do I feel safe in revealing my innermost passion to others? Initially, my proposal for research involved using nature as a metaphor with clients in art therapy. Seeing this as too vague and non-committal, I later returned to the concept in more concrete terms: how can I get people in touch with nature through art therapy? How can I incorporate my own passion for nature into my practice as an art therapist? The possibilities were far-reaching. Slides, photographs, and natural materials all offered interesting alternatives to 'traditional' art therapy practice. However, in terms of a clinical application, I realized my own discomfort at introducing such things without having really examined my own experience more deeply. I have always felt drawn to nature, but I never stopped to consider what it really *means* to me. Is it the spaciousness and the fresh air that draws me outside? The texture of tree bark? The song of a sparrow? The anticipation of an eagle sighting? Furthermore, *how do I conceptualize nature*? This became an important question to consider, as I began to realize the extent to which my own concept of nature would govern my position as researcher and hence, shape the course of my heuristic inquiry. I began to ask myself questions about nature—

how do I relate to it? *Imagine* it? How do I experience this connection with the natural world? Needless to say, in this process of questioning, I realized that developing therapeutic interventions with art and nature would require further exploration on my part as an individual and a member of our earthly community.

At the onset of this formalized research process, my intention was focused on how nature, and more specifically, experience *with* or *in* nature, might act as a catalyst for creative experience in the context of art therapy. This stemmed from my belief that experience with nature has the capacity to act as a catalyst for the creative experience, and hence, the *therapeutic*, experience. Hence, I developed a proposal for heuristic research to study the reciprocal relationship that exists between myself, and the natural world. This method of heuristic research involves many stages specific to the method. Douglass & Moustakas (1985) outline a three-phase model of the specific stages of the heuristic, while Moustakas (1990) further develops this model in his six-stage model of heuristic inquiry. These six stages are: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. These stages are understood to be organic and fluid by nature, making the heuristic process a cyclical, non-linear event. Accordingly, these stages embody more specific processes such as indwelling, intuition, tacit knowing and self-dialogue which all provide the researcher with clues and guidance for insights and future directions. Throughout heuristic inquiry, the researcher is constantly in the process of returning to the self, listening to inner instincts, hunches and intuitions as a source of valuable information, while also returning to earlier explanations in an effort to make sure that descriptions given match the phenomenon as it was experienced.

Furthermore, I decided to combine my own experience as participant and researcher in nature (heuristic investigation) with a phenomenological analysis of my creative responses (artwork). According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985), a heuristic framework demands that the researcher experience the self, as well as encountering people and the world at large in an effort to generate a new reality. Being that heuristic enquiry emphasizes connectedness, relationship and intersubjectivity, it seemed especially well-suited to the topic at hand. As a practical construct, phenomenology demands that the viewer bring a deeper *intention* to the act of seeing (Betensky, 1987). Betensky (1987) describes this intentionality as being "intent on the thing that I am looking at. By means of my intent look, I make that thing appear to my consciousness more clearly than before I was intent on looking at it" (p. 151). Hence, for the purposes of my research investigation, I also felt it important to step out of a purely heuristic, self-oriented approach, and observe the art objects from a greater distance. After working on a particular creative response, I would often sit down with pencil and paper and write stream of consciousness thoughts as a means of reflecting on the process. Putting away the artwork, and returning to it a few days later also provided a more objective distance from which to view the artwork. While Betensky used a more structured approached to re-viewing the art product, I chose to work more intuitively, taking the space and time as I felt I needed it. Giving myself time to allow the work to "incubate" before reflecting on its more formal compositional and expressive qualities added another useful dimension and greater depth to my process.

For the purposes of this research I decided that "experience *in* nature" would be designated as any type of focused experience outdoors in a natural environment (ie.

parks, nature reserves); while I chose to describe "experience *with* nature" as referring more specifically to *objects* or *component parts* of nature that are brought into the studio to work from, and respond to. I make no overt distinction between specific "materials" in nature. I anticipated that this would include any organic material found while in nature, ranging from pinecones, seed pods and leaves, to mud, rocks, branches, bark or snow. The local ecosystem and geographical location I was in dictated the range of available materials.

A hermeneutic framework: spiral as process

While wanting to maintain a broad perspective out of respect for the values of interconnectedness and relationships, I knew that I would also need to establish a focal point for this exploration. I soon realized that beginning with something as large and all-encompassing as nature, would also demand a significant amount of narrowing down, in order to establish a guiding vision of my exploration. Hence, over the course of my own heuristic process, I have, at times, both narrowed and broadened my field of inquiry. This oscillation has governed the rhythm of my research, and this rhythm is characteristic of what is known as "the hermeneutic spiral" (Linesch, 1994).

The hermeneutic spiral provides a valuable metaphor for not only the process of heuristic research, but for the practice of art and the practice of psychotherapy. All three require an openness to the unexpected, an ability to tolerate uncertainty, and a respect for chaos as part of the process. In the context of art as therapy, Edith Kramer (2000) states: "The essence of art and of psychotherapy is flexibility and openness. It also implies tolerance for periods of disorganization and turmoil as ingrained habits of defense lose their hold and new organization is only in the making" (p. 23). In this explanation of art

therapy, Kramer could equally be describing the heuristic research process itself. Heuristic research *is* a creative process—one that demands surrender to the process and openness to the unexpected. Similarly, psychotherapy also moves according to its own inner rhythm, and evolves through the therapeutic relationship, amidst each individual's own pace and process. Adding the backdrop of nature to this combination further enriches the metaphor, as it too embodies the never-ending cycles and seasons of life.

Summary

I can trace my research process back to my earliest memories of childhood, while my move from a familiar life rich with nature to a more urban and unfamiliar existence acted as the specific catalyst for this research. In developing my proposal, I chose to adopt a heuristic framework for my research in the interest of deepening my experience and understanding of my relationship to the natural world. Taking time to step back and see the artwork from a more phenomenological perspective also served to provide a more in-depth look at the art objects themselves. This process of oscillating attention can be characterized by what is known as "the hermeneutic spiral"—a rhythm of alternating awareness, from the specific to the more generalizable and back again (Linesch, 1994). This rhythm has also occurred as I steered my attention between reviewing literature on my chosen topic and staying with my own personal experience. Turning to available literature on the topic has an essential part of examining my own experience. Throughout my research, these other opinions, experiences, and concepts have proven indispensable companions along the way.

Chapter 3

Literature review

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an overview of relevant research, ideas and theories as they apply to art therapy and the human-nature relationship. I have drawn from a variety of disciplines in this investigation, and the research I have chosen to present spans the fields of art therapy, psychology, and ecopsychology, as well as other disciplines such as neurobiology, spirituality, experiential education and the fine arts. I have also incorporated my own experience at conferences and workshops. The main contents of the chapter involve exploring how and why the practice of art therapy (just as any other human endeavor) must be seen within a larger context. The context of which I speak is a global one – and it demands embracing our small place on the planet Earth, just as it embraces us. I believe that cultivating an awareness of, and appreciation for, our global context is essential in every modern day practice; and that art therapy is no exception. In fact, I intend to show how it may be especially well-placed to incorporate this planetary awareness into its healing practice—to the benefit of clients, therapists, and the planet itself.

Early in my research, I discovered an article by Maureen Kellen-Taylor (1998) calling for the need to "repopulat(e) our imagination and memories with direct experiences of nature" (p. 308). Reading this sentence not only confirmed my intuition, but propelled me on in my research process. I later had the opportunity to meet Maureen in person, and the encounter provided me with a chance to bring substance to my aspirations. In her article, Kellen-Taylor (1998) goes on to call for a broader perspective

in which nature is perceived as not just a therapeutic tool, but as a theoretical context. Her writing put words to my intention, and I credit this article as having sharpened my focus while acting as a beacon of light for my own research journey. The perceptual shift Kellen-Taylor offers has significant implications for traditional psychotherapy and for the creative arts therapies. It has also had significant implications for me as a student, an art therapist and a researcher.

As Maureen and I further discussed our passions about this topic, this unexpectedly synchronous encounter served to render my own vision of my research more vivid and tangible. This conversation became just one of what would prove to be many encounters with like-minded individuals, for which I'm deeply grateful. Likewise, the process of reviewing the literature on the topic has also brought to light many of my own biases and assumptions, and has challenged me to examine my passions in a new light. I began to experience the research process as both requiring deep passion and commitment to one's own personal vision, while also exerting the willingness to let go of pre-conceived assumptions. In light of this, my intention in this paper is to present my experience as only one of many—I realize that there are a multitude of ways from which to investigate a topic such as this one, each of which is valid and authentic in its own right.

Review of literature

Much of modern day life denies the presence of nature. Today, most cities provide us with a view of nature that is distorted at best. Manicured parks, plastic-wrapped produce, well-coiffed pets and tropical houseplants characterize what we know of nature. We don't see it in our surroundings, we don't feel it underfoot, we don't smell

it, hear it or taste it. Our senses—programmed to respond to nature, are now bombarded by the linear, noisy, polluted places we inhabit. This absence of nature in our immediate surroundings has cultivated an absence of nature in our psyches. Yet despite the fact that the field of psychotherapy has grown out of a need to address such absences in the psyche, nearly a century of psychotherapy has seen humans who aren't getting any better, and a planet whose health is getting worse (Hillman and Ventura, 1992).

Traditionally speaking, psychotherapy has been aimed at exploring intrapsychic processes, with little emphasis placed on the environmental context of these concerns (Lundberg, 1998). It seems that in the course of psychotherapy we have been more concerned about ourselves than our planet. Accordingly, modern Western psychological thought has been informed by a theoretical disposition towards reinforcing the alienation of the psyche from nature (Devereux, 1996). This absence of nature is not only confined to the field of psychology. Having roots in modern psychological theory and practice, the field of art therapy has inevitably been influenced by this bias towards the individual. And while the creative arts therapies have vehemently embraced the importance of a *creative* context in clinical practice, they have also minimized the importance of an *ecological* context in practice. Interestingly, it is worth noting that this shortcoming in the field of art therapy may be due, in part, to the fact that our visual senses are bombarded by a culture of consumerism and exposure to manufactured images. Children's inner landscapes are being blurred by advertising and video games (Gerity, 2000), and this relentless consumer culture has inevitably contributed to "a profound absence of nature in our memories and imagination" (Kellen-Taylor, 1998, p. 305). Hence, our exclusion of the natural world in the practice of art therapy may be a

symptom of our dwindling awareness of the natural world in our own imaginations. It is in response to this absence that I intend to examine how the field of art therapy can benefit from adopting an ecological framework in order to address what is today being hailed as nothing less than a "crisis of perception" (Sewall, 1998).

In surveying the history of psychology, Roszak (1992) suggests that most of the major schools of modern psychological thought tend to reinforce the alienation of the psyche from nature. This position may be somewhat arguable, as much of what takes place in the privileged relationship between client and therapist cannot be known. We have no way of knowing times or places where environmental concerns may have been raised, where individuals expressed a deep felt connection, or alienation with the land. However, the field of ecopsychology *is* unique in that it strives to make the human-nature connection explicit, as opposed to relegating it to the intimate chambers of therapy. Theodore Roszak is often credited with pioneering the field of ecopsychology, and he describes ecopsychology as a discipline that endeavors to "bridge our culture's long-standing, historical gulf between the psychological and the ecological, to see the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum" (p. 14). In this way, it seems that ecopsychology is seeking to give a framework to what many have experienced or known, intuitively. The field of ecopsychology has also been defined as a theory and practice "based on the recognition that the needs of the earth and the needs of the human individual are interdependent and interconnected" (Conn, 1998, p. 180). Its goal is to bridge the gap between ecology (the study of connectedness) and psychology (the study of the human psyche), and to begin a search for the deeper connections between the human and the nonhuman world (Roszak, 1992).

Closely connected to the field of ecopsychology, the Deep Ecology movement rejects the notion of human superiority and dominance over nature, in favor of a more egalitarian worldview where humans exist *within* the natural environment (Devereux, 1996). In so examining the human-nature relationships, many researchers and clinicians cite very early evidence of healers who worked from within nature, as opposed to outside of it (Burns, 1998; Devereux, 1996; McNiff, 1981; Roszak, 1992, 1995; Wilshire, 1998). Accordingly, traditions such as shamanism are ancient and all-encompassing—focusing on communication with animals, plants and the elements, transcendence of human form through shapeshifting, while perceiving the universe as a web of interconnections (Rugh, 2001). In reference to this web of communication, McNiff (1981), an expressive arts therapist, suggests that shamanism "surpasses psychiatry in its ability to relate to the transcendent source of life and the dynamic pulse of creative action" (p. 6). Furthermore, Roszak (1992) suggests that before the psychiatry of modern Western society, all healers did their work with a great respect for our embeddedness within the natural world and the powers of the cosmos—humans were not considered to be "separate" from their surroundings. In offering proof of the absence of an ecological consciousness in modern psychiatry, Roszak cites "zoophilia" as the only recognized disease in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual that connects mental illness to the nonhuman world (1992). It is just this absence of an ecological sensibility within mainstream medicine that spawned the fields of Deep Ecology and ecopsychology, which have, in turn, stimulated research and inquiry into the human-nature connection.

Devereux (1996) agrees with Roszak's assertion about the absence of nature in psychology, and outlines the gaps in various schools of psychological thought. He

outlines this by suggesting that Freud's model of psychotherapy separates person from planet, Jung's archetypes are abstracted and separated from nature, object relations theory considers the social environment at the exclusion of the natural environment, existential theory tends to denature the natural environment, while humanistic psychology prioritizes individuals' transcendence of their environment. And despite passing considerations of the therapeutic environment, or the role of nature as part of early experience in attachment, it does seem that most schools of psychological thought have chosen to focus more on the individual as a psychological entity of their own, as opposed to studying how the psyche is shaped by virtue of being part of the natural world. Conn (1995) also asserts that the three main streams of psychological thought -- psychoanalytic, cognitive/behavioral and humanistic/existential reflect an individualistic bias, which has led modern psychological thought to treat the individual as separate, self-contained, and motivated by purely egoistic needs of "self-interest, self-development and self-actualization" (p. 162).

This scientific separatist perspective is beginning to shift, however, as researchers and clinicians start to acknowledge the crucial role that the natural environment, and more specifically, our *relationship* with the natural environment, plays in human health and development (Abram, 1996, Devereux, 1996, Heerwagen & White, 1998, Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982, Lundberg, 1998, Reynolds, 1995, Roszak, 1992, Shepard, 1995). One example can be seen in the field of environmental psychology -- a sub-discipline of psychology dedicated to the study of human-environment relations. While focusing primarily on the built environment and its effects on human functioning, research in environmental psychology has also examined the human experience of nature. For

instance, in studying how views of nature in an office environment influence workers, Kaplan & Kaplan (1978) found that employees who had a view of vegetation experienced less stress and more job satisfaction than colleagues who did not have a view of the outdoors. These research findings (Kaplan, 1974, Kaplan, 1977, Kaplan & Kaplan, 1978, 1982), also suggest that aesthetic natural environments both support and restore human functioning, and that wilderness experience instills a sense of awe, wonder, and relatedness in the experiencing individuals. It is worth noting, however, the choice of mostly 'aesthetic' natural environments in this research—views of horizons, flowers, water and trees were presented—to the exclusion of views depicting the more vehement aspects of nature such as natural disasters, or carnivorous acts. Had individuals been presented with images of floods, forest fires or whales devouring sunbathing seals, the results may have been quite different. Ulrich (1993) developed an experimental model that also examined the effects of negative views. He designed a study whereby participants were exposed to stress-inducing films and then were asked to perform difficult tasks or describe a situation that had elicited stress and anger. Participants were randomly assigned to various treatment conditions, and subjects either viewed slides of urban scenes or slides of nature scenes. Those subjects who viewed the nature scenes showed a faster reduction in stress and quicker physiological recovery, and they also reported more positive emotion than the control group who saw only urban scenes. It is interesting to note the bias present within such studies, as nature is presented as peaceful and beautiful—pitted against urban scenes. What about pleasant scenes of urban parks compared to the image of drought in the desert? The temptation to idealize nature runs deeply throughout the literature.

The field of psychiatry is also beginning to acknowledge the role of the natural environment on mental health and functioning. White (1998) concedes that concern over environmental problems has led psychiatry and the behavioral sciences to begin to "pay some attention to the environment" in hopes of better understanding human ecology and diminishing human impact on the planet (p. 205). He suggests that clinicians address concerns about the environment openly with clients and "foster open exchange patients concerning these issues" (White, 1998, p. 212). Lundberg (1998) speaks to this growing environmental awareness in citing research that was undertaken to measure the effects of environmental change on human health. Factors examined include: chemical pollution, climate change, heat, radiation, migration, light and biological diversity on human health and mental illness. Lundberg (1998) also suggests that: "the great pleasure most people get from natural landscapes, the intense sadness we can feel when watching a forest fire of dying dogwood trees, the strong feelings we can have about animals, all seem to point to a fundamental affinity with the living environment" (p. 20).

Beyond strictly scientific and medical-based research, various outdoor programs are based on the "healing" aspects of nature. Reynolds (1995) describes a non-profit program entitled "Animals As Intermediaries" as an initiative that "grew out of a belief that we are all connected through nature, that this connection can restore a sense of wholeness and a sense of place, and that this connection is both elemental and essential" (xiii). Wilderness challenge programs such as Outward Bound are aimed at promoting the benefits of experience in nature. And while most reports are anecdotal and lack empirical evidence and methodology, therapists still seem to believe strongly in the therapeutic value of wilderness experiences (Heerwagen & White, 1998). Furthermore,

creative visualization of particular scenes in nature, such as views of the horizon, water, flowers and trees, is used in relaxation therapy to reduce stress and anxiety and promote cognitive relaxation (Heerwagen & White, 1998). Accordingly, in reviewing the literature further, it occurs to me that Theodore Roszak's scathing criticism of the field of psychology, while visionary in scope, may also underestimate the prevalence of an ecological sensibility that is already present, albeit subtly, within the field of psychotherapy. Then again, this paradigm shift that is beginning to occur may also be due, in significant part, to the critical perspective and alternative practice of psychotherapy that is being put forth by ecopsychologists such as Conn and Roszak.

Research on child development also readily acknowledges the intimate connection between children and the natural environment (Katcher & Wilkins, 1998, LaChapelle, 1988, Moore, 1986, Shepard, 1995, Tuan, 1978). LaChapelle (1988) addresses this universal connection with nature by suggesting that children bond with the natural environment soon after they have bonded with the mother. Paul Shepard (1995) suggests that current practices of environmental destruction stems from a form of "ontogenetic crippling" where human culture perpetuates a false sense of separation from the natural world (p. 21). He characterizes the outdoors as another version of the fetal landscape, where "the surroundings are also that which will be swallowed, internalized, incorporated as the self" (p. 27). While asserting that children's curiosity is not enough to foster a relationship with nature, and that they must be taught about the natural world by adults, Tuan (1978) states that "a sense of kinship with nature is universal" (p. 29).

In the face of current multi-environmental degradation, Feral (1998) puts forth a "connectedness model" of development that challenges the notion of an isolated self—

such as previous developmental models based on Mahler's concept of separation and individuation (p. 254). Results from her therapeutic program in nature for emotionally at-risk children showed an increase in self-esteem, happiness, educational status and emotional development. In this study, the Draw A Person: Quantitative Scoring System (DAP:QSS) showed "70 percent of pre-intervention drawings to contain aggressive symbols, whereas post-intervention drawings contained *no* aggressive symbols" (Feral, 1998, p. 261).

Barrows (1995) lends further depth to our understanding of the human-nature connection. By examining this relationship from an object-relations perspective, she suggests that nature actually functions as a holding environment for each individual as we seek out conditions to facilitate our transition away from mother and into the world. As a transitional space, nature would act as a permeable membrane, breaking down the objective and the subjective, as opposed to perpetuating the concept of a rigid boundary separating the self from the other. Consequently, she argues for a paradigm shift that acknowledges the infant as being born not only into a social context, but into an ecological context as well. Furthermore, she presents evidence of an innate "ecological self" as is evidenced in the infants sensual delight in his body, and his sensuous contact with the world of grass, bathwater, or a cat's fur (p. 107).

More recently, this trend towards acknowledging the role of the environment in human health has also started to infiltrate the creative arts therapies; and research in the field reveals this growing awareness of the human-environment connection (Davis, 1999, Henderson, 1999, Kellen-Taylor, 1998, Klorer, 1992). Henderson (1999) chose to use animal imagery as the central component of counseling sessions with adolescents. In this

case, adolescents were provided with images of wild animals, and invited to choose an animal that "felt most like the person inside" (p. 21). Various aspects of the chosen animal were explored in the sessions, and these images became metaphors within the therapeutic process. Hence, the animal image was used as a both a cognitive tool and an affective tool in facilitating discussion, integrating a sense of self, exploring painful feelings and redirecting impulsivity.

Davis (1999) explored the role of art in the environment by developing a community sculpture park as part of a treatment program for mentally ill women. This initiative was taken up in an effort to provide clients with an opportunity to move outside of the studio, and to create *in* a larger outdoor environment. Accordingly, an empty lot was transformed into a site for sculpture, and being able to make alterations in the external world proved valuable for clients. It was reported that "the non-verbal communication between environment and participant allowed for play and freedom which often gave a different perspective to feelings of total hopelessness" (p. 16). Art *in* the environment has also been applied in the context of wilderness therapy. When incorporated on a daily basis, art therapy activities, such as journal writing, drawing, and sculpting proved to be essential components of a wilderness stress challenge program for adolescents; it helped by promoting personal reflection, clarifying feelings and to give shape to feelings experienced during the events (Klorer, 1992).

In examining the ecopsychological literature, it is useful to note that art-making, metaphor and creativity are also being acknowledged for their invaluable role in re-building our relationship with the natural world. The fields of ecopsychology and art therapy are already beginning to overlap. Laura Sewall (1995, 1998), a perceptual

psychologist and ecopsychologist, highlights the importance of perceiving the world in metaphors as a tool to enlarge our worldview; and she suggests that communicating in metaphors lends depth to our experience by bringing together previously unrelated realms in a meaningful way. Roberts (1998) cites how tools such as embodiment, symbolism and imagination are all being used to "reawaken the senses, renew connections with the natural world, overcome learned helplessness, develop a sense of place and regional identity, and facilitate spiritual experience" (p. 28). In developing the "Enviro-Mentor Program" for emotionally at-risk children, Feral (1998) includes totem selection, role-play, art therapy, and nature visualization exercises within the developmental framework of nature in a therapeutic format. It follows, then, that these studies in ecopsychology all rely upon the language of art to articulate and explore the interrelationship between human and nature.

It could be argued that this aesthetic sensibility is most apparent in the field of perceptual psychology. Perceptual psychology is very much concerned with how we see the world – a concern that exists at the core of both art therapy and ecopsychology. Whereas ecopsychology is calling for a radical change in our perception of nature, art therapy draws on the inherent capacity of the creative process to express one's unique perception of the world. Henderson (1999) describes the artistic process as the "rearrangement of elements of the natural world" (p. 24). Consequently, in re-arranging and externalizing this personalized worldview, art inevitably creates new links which may begin to alter perceptual patterns. Laura Sewall (1998) suggests that this conscious attention actually works to develop new neural pathways in the brain, and that through the practice of looking at, and noticing relationships, we can change the neural tracks in

our brains. She explains that each person's worldview is built by experience and perceptual habits –habits which then translate into neural structures in the brain. Hence, "our worldview is created by virtue of what we look at" (p.166). Interestingly, art therapy with natural materials, or in a natural environment engaged senses beyond just our sight, as we are even more inclined to come into contact with the world around us through all our senses. Perception becomes more than a purely visual act—it is engaged through our hands, skin, sense of smell, hearing, taste and touch as well. In comparison, if we choose to break out of established perceptual habits by engaging in the creative process, it is here that our worldview may also begin to change.

According to Kellen-Taylor (1998), "Art hones our abilities to perceive and reconfigure unusual and dynamic patterns, associations and connections. Making art implies travel amongst the realms of the sensuous and the intellectual, the abstract and the material, the spiritual and the mundane" (p. 304). She outlines some of the ways in which the creative arts therapies can benefit from adopting an ecological framework by suggesting that "art processes can be used to reclaim our memories and imaginations through building relationships with nature"(p. 308). Furthermore, she calls for the need to "repopulat(e) our imagination and memories with direct experiences of nature" (p. 308), and goes on to call for a broader perspective in which nature is perceived not just a therapeutic tool, but as a theoretical context.

Interestingly, the more I pursued this line of research, the more I encountered art therapists who are already incorporating an ecological consciousness into their practice (Farrelly-Hansen, 2001, Kellen-Taylor, 1998, Rugh, 2001). This sensibility is also seen in the proliferation of nature-based themes at conferences in the field. The annual

American Art Therapy Association conference in 2001 offered workshops on "Ecopsychology and Art Therapy" (Rugh, 2001), while the most recent conference of the International Expressive Arts Therapies Association, held in April 2002, was entirely dedicated to the theme of "Ecology and the Expressive Arts Therapies". I attended both conferences, and was encouraged to meet other arts therapists who also felt a deep connection to the topic of nature and art therapy, both personally and professionally.

Summary

The current psychological literature is just beginning to consider the human psyche as part of a larger environment, and up until recently it has failed to pay explicit attention to the fact that individuals are organisms embedded in a larger context. Both art therapy and ecopsychology are concerned with how individuals perceive their environment. Art inherently challenges rigid boundaries of perception by exploring the inner world and engaging with fantasy and imagination. Ecopsychology calls for a perceptual shift in order to heal our epidemic of separation from nature. Consequently, the addition of ecology to the mix of art and psychotherapy re-inforces the inherently healing and integrating processes that bring about perceptual change in human beings (Kellen-Taylor, 1998). The need to change our perceptual practice is of central concern to how art therapy can address the current environmental crisis; and there is a growing body of research that suggests that adopting an ecological perspective will undeniably enrich and expand the practice of art therapy.

Chapter 4

My creative process

Introduction

Despite being "immersed" in the literature, the period of researching and writing the review felt like more of an academic pursuit than an experiential one. For this reason, I would not characterize it as a period of immersion in the purest heuristic sense, but more as a time of acquisition (Moustakas, 1990) as I spent much of my time trying to 'acquire' knowledge--searching for definitions and clear-cut answers. And while researching the literature was an essential component of this process, it also kept me preoccupied with *defining* nature. I felt unable to surrender to the search, hesitant to relinquish control of my ideas and assumptions about nature. During this time, I made endless lists, trying to pin down the word or phrase that would embody the essence of nature for me. Yet the more I tried, the more futile and meaningless this exercise became. The more I attempted to assign words to the concept of 'nature' the more vague and insubstantial the concept became. The longer I sat with pen and paper trying to build a concise definition, the further I left my own felt experience of nature. I began to feel that there was no *one* definition of "nature" to discover. As this realization dawned on me, I began to understand that, as human beings, we all "create and imagine nature rather than simply observe and discover it" (Chambers, 1984, p.1). My attempts at discovering a definition remained elusive as my own imaginings about nature got "in the way" of building an objective definition. Inevitably, my ideas about nature changed as my projections did. For example, if in a given moment I sought security, then nature offered a safe holding environment. If I desired challenge, than nature became unpredictable and

wild. While painting, nature became the essence of my own creative impulse and the source of all creation. Hence, it became apparent to me that my many definitions of "nature" had come to say more about my state of mind than they did about nature itself. At this time, I began to relax my grasp of words and concepts, let go of my desire to define nature, and surrender to the fact that my understanding of nature could come only from being *with* it, not theorizing *about* it. I left the literature, stopped speaking in words, and turned to art. This is where the first real phase of "immersion" began.

Creative responses

Being *with* the landscape, instead of theorizing *about* it, demanded my own creative engagement with my surroundings. I felt unsure about how to begin. I was still bothered by my rational, analytic mind. Where should I start this investigation? What materials should I use? Should I begin indoors or outside? Should I assign a subject matter for myself? Amidst these many questions, I re-directed my focus back to the 'emergent' nature of the heuristic process itself. In doing so, I trusted that my experience in, and of, the natural world would activate my imagination (Berry, 1999). I hoped that the tacit dimension would emerge and so, guided by my intuition, I began.

The artwork that came out of this period of intense immersion varies in size, scale, media and composition. Some images are bold and bright, while others use little color at all. They range from abstract to representational, and include both two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. I suppose they might be viewed as a broad range of my responses to nature. These responses also represent various levels of engagement with the natural world, in which the same subject matter may be treated very differently. In reflecting upon the images themselves, and adopting a more intentional

way of seeing (Betensky, 1987), I am hesitant to say *too* much about them. I don't want my words to take away from the experience of the images themselves. Such attempts at over-interpretation can be likened to "continually pulling up a plant to inspect the roots" (Nowell Hall *et al.* 1987 in Kuczaj, 1998). So I have consciously chosen to offer some description of the work itself, while trying to avoid pulling them to pieces through my own free-associations or externally imposed categorizations. Furthermore, I hope to let the images speak for themselves. And I trust that across their diversity, these art objects also speak in a common, creative voice.

Cosmic landscapes

At the onset of this process, I began by making small drawings in oil pastel on 2 1/2" x 3 1/2" card stock (Images 3-8). I did this with the intention of simply creating—freeing myself of any criteria or preconceived ideas. These cards gave me the space and freedom to experiment and play, and I began to cherish them as little windows into my inner spaces. In this way, they began to serve as small inspiration cards (McNiff, 1998), which I returned to often—especially when feeling dull, stuck or disillusioned. Interestingly, the imagery that surfaced spontaneously in this repetitive process of playful card-making was very much based in nature. This uninhibited repetitive process produced whimsical scenes of patterns and places in nature. These small studies range from fairly representational, to mostly abstract; however, at the core of each image resides a fundamental sensibility for nature in pattern and line. Rocks and water, sunbursts and spiral patterns made frequent appearances. The moon was a frequent visitor as well.

Images 3 and 4 both depict a shoreline, as the rock in the water sends ripples outwards beyond itself. In the images themselves there is a quality of connectedness—the rippies around the rocks reach out through the water to the shoreline, offering a metaphor for how each element of the natural world exerts an influence on another. Over time, I imagine lapping water shaping these rocks, just as the form and presence of the rocks shapes the rhythm and motion of the surrounding water.

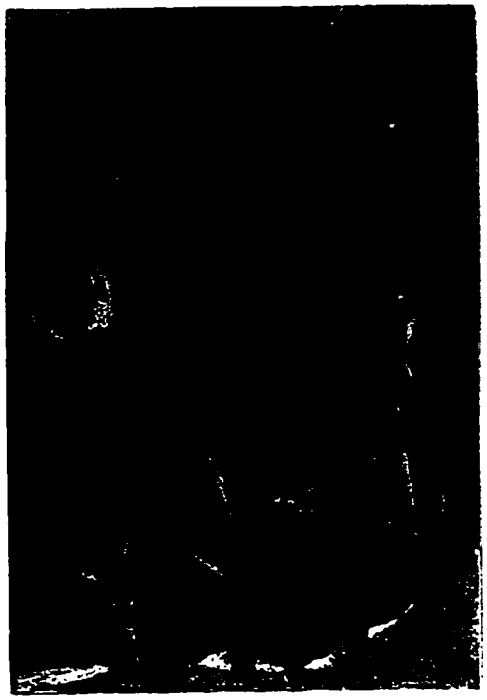
Images 5 and 6 burst forth as abstract compositions, spiraling in space, filling up the picture plane with dynamic movement and directional energy. In these compositions, each line and form is inevitably shaped and sculpted by the surrounding lines and forms. The spiraling lines offer a similar pattern to the rippling water—repeating circles expanding outwards beyond the center point. Interestingly, these repetitive lines echo the process by which they were rendered—a repetitive process of making small cards, one after another after another. Images 7 and 8 are more earth-based, and in both landscapes, the moon appears, adding a watchful, mystical presence. There is a horizon line here, and a sense of space beyond—what lies beyond the horizon remains unknown and eternally elusive. The following passage is an excerpt from reflections I made in my journal immediately after executing the images. I came to appreciate the way writing can add flow and stream of consciousness insight to the imagery:

The patterns are from nature: landscape, foreground/background, seashell or spiral or sunshine, stones and hills, stems and sky. Organic shapes emerging out of, or whirling in chaos. Organic shapes created in chaos. Witnessing the creation of the world. We are closer than we realize. Little pieces of play. Revealing an awareness

Images 3 and 4

Images 5 and 6

Images 7 and 8



of this proximity. Like a microscope revealing what makes up the whole universe.

The products of creation—some more orderly than others, some more chaotic.

I feel as if these images are caricatures of nature in some way—as I view them, they introduce me to my own imaginative realm—they are the bodies and spirits of nature that inhabit my awareness—they are the sensuous world as I see it. As each image emerged, I felt grateful for this unexpected sense of companionship. These little visions give me a sense of groundedness and connection. They reveal my relationship with the natural world. Through them, I became aware of my own imagination—the joy, color, texture and pattern of the compositions. These cards are like a physical version of the earliest "facts" of my experience—the same patterns and places I perhaps visited as a child.

Furthermore, what had initially begun as a starting point for my creative process took on a larger significance for me. This process of spontaneous, non-judgmental play became an essential component of my research process, as it provided me with a safe place to return to when the larger process became overwhelming. Hence, the size and scale of these mini-drawings made them manageable and less daunting. They helped to balance my focus, and provided me with a place of rest amidst my attention, as it oscillated between large themes and small details. The small inspiration cards acted as anchors for me when I needed to turn inwards and play without inhibition. Interestingly, just as these cards provided me with a safe place to play, so could these spontaneous, small-scale art-cards provide a useful means of titrating the experience of nature for clients, especially those who are unfamiliar with nature, or may perceive it as overwhelming and/or threatening. Entering into nature can be a potent experience for anyone, and these cards may offer a safe and gentle entry into communion with nature, as

used to explore people's ideas about nature before even entering into it. Their small size and sharp borders delineates the space to be worked with, while providing clients with clear plastic 'playing card" sleeves could also add another dimension of containment to the experience. Viewing these products in a presentation sleeve could also provide an interesting opportunity to reflect upon any common themes emerging in the work, with relation to color, pattern, and subject matter, while also paying attention to the diversity available within the repetitive format.

Responses to the city

The art cards allowed me a safe place to play, but following this foray into my inner realm, there also came the time when I needed to move beyond the security of myself and get out into the world. Feeling overwhelmed by the relentless expanse of the city, coupled with my deep longing for nature, led me to seek natural places within the confines of the city. One particular day found me biking up the trail of a large park in the center of downtown Montreal. I had anticipated a deep feeling of relief and well-being upon entering into this park. However, after riding for just a short time I found myself feeling ill at ease. I sat down and wrote:

> *Nature feels startling and foreign. I don't resonate. I feel cut off and despairing that I am outside of this—aware of my longing to be in it. After being programmed by the city, nature has become confrontational. I can see why people might avoid nature—it confronts us with our own sense of loss and alienation.*

Here, for the first time, my idealization of nature began to crumble, and I felt left out. I had gone to nature seeking solace, and been confronted instead with my own unease and discomfort in a place where I didn't belong. I felt shocked and helpless, as it seemed that

nature was demanding to be seen as something other than beautiful and good. And I felt cut off because of this. Cut off because I, up until this point, had been willing only to relate to nature in its beautiful, numinous presence. Perhaps my feeling cut off from this place was actually me feeling cut off from my inner "ugliness", my decay, my fragility. This encounter with the unexpectedly unsympathetic side of nature, became a metaphor for my own experience—a significant reminder of the diabolical side of the natural world, and of human nature. I was given a glimpse of this shadow side that exists in all of us, and may surface at any time. In nature, it became unexpectedly confrontational, and in this context, I was moved by the power of being immersed in an environment that provided me with no escape from the discomfort I felt. It made me acutely aware of my tendency to want to see the good in the things around me. I began to question how my own optimism could cut me off from a world that is haunting, threatening and frightening. This has significant implications for my practice as an art therapist, as it is tempting to see the beauty in nature, and the beauty of the creative process at the expense of ignoring crucial and tumultuous issues as they arise.

Feelings of being lost and confused prevailed, as my "immersion" (in the heuristic sense) continued. This led to a period during which I felt purely furious with the city. I responded to this inner fury by building a large painting/installation in my studio at home. (Images 9-11). This installation comprised pieces of garbage and various nails and tacks as they pierced the paper and the wall. Ironically, creating it felt more like an act of *destruction*—as I poured out all of my pent-up anger and despair, disgust and hopelessness into this project. Throughout the process, and for days afterwards, I recorded my feelings and responses in living with this 'act of destruction':

Image 9

Images 10 and 11

Leave it sharp Dagger skewer stab. Driven to stab out of anger and madness. BLACK. gets dark enough, reaches deep enough to reach the void and draw it out into visibility. Look into it. ... Winter in the woods demands this—stripped down and barren beyond beauty. So very ugly and harsh....I can see an integrated whole/hole held together by the darkness. With a frame to give it weight on one side and tissue—lightness on the other. Thick with meaning. Cloudy like a smoke-filled room. ... I can even hear it moving a little as the tension of the tape relaxes in places, the paint dries, it starts to smell and fall and shift a little. Shadows cast against the wall. It will look different by morning. By mourning. Bones—bones—jaw—tooth—claw—evidence of everything.

Living with this reminder on the wall further deepened the experience that began when I made it. A phase of "indwelling" ensued, as I passed by the installation each day, occasionally pausing to sit with it and consider it more deeply. I was surprised at how often I felt relieved seeing it there on the wall—black and so bold—demanding to be seen. I recognized myself in it—and I felt deep satisfaction at seeing my anger in tangible form—to see it on the wall, with room to breathe and be seen. It remained there for many weeks, and in that time, I came to appreciate its subtleties as well as its striking, gestural strokes—the large dark streaks that begin up above—the way black overlaps with white and black again. The yellow adds the presence of heat, of a burning sun, while wire and branches collide, and nails and tape try to hold it all together. I examined it from various angles over time, each time leaving with a new perspective on myself. Eventually, when it came time to take it down, I took it apart in pieces—keeping some

parts that I felt especially drawn to, while discarding others. Recycling my sense of self, I collected elements to incorporate into myself anew.

In this work, the paradox of life and death emerges—the tension between creation and destruction, my own wrestle to draw out the darkness and incorporate it as part of myself. It was an act of creation fueled by anger and come alive by the tension of this release. At this point, this installation was the first "ugly" thing I had permitted myself to make in response to nature. In the process, I was willing to not only experience nature as barren and difficult, but I was willing to see myself and such as my anger and shadowy side took shape on the wall in my studio.

Other initiatives grew out of this initial reaction to urban life. In comparison to the destructive impulse that drove my installation, my pain and anger also compelled me to take action through the creation of a small "anger altar". One morning in particular, I collected fallen branches and pinecones, gathered rocks and leaves, and with them I built a small circle set on frozen ice. In the middle of this circle, I lit a candle, where I watched it flicker and glow until the winter wind snuffed it out. I left it there without documenting it. I wanted it to remain as the remnants of my anger and despair. I wanted to leave it there as a part of me—my contribution and act of connection—a ring of response in a place where there seemed to be none. This intimate gesture provided closure for the less inhibited wall piece I had created, and despite my frozen fingers, I felt grateful that the strength of this freezing weather could contain and for a time 'freeze' the magnitude of my anger. After building it, I wrote about the experience:

> *I woke up this morning feeling furious about nature, or more specifically, about the disgraceful lack of it in my life and in the city. I've heard three women in the*

past three days speak about how they hate the city, mourn the absence of nature in their lives, 'get away' on the weekends to escape from the depression-inducing busyness. What does the city mean for women like this and for myself? What does it represent? For me, it means walking down streets full of litter and feeling like I myself have been littered on. It means seeing graffiti on what was once a frozen waterfall and feeling pain and loss shatter my body. It means trying to find a different way to walk home—in search of novelty at least, even if I can't find the natural beauty I seek. It means settling for what it absent. And it means silence—silently accepting the 'reality' of the city, because it provides us with jobs, money, convenience, proximity, education, 'opportunity'. At times I feel as if the city is steals my choices while it cages my creative impulses. I feel myself as one of many creative women in crisis—drowned out by the hum of air conditioners and cement trucks. Buried by noise, I am made blind. Today is international women's day. And on this day I am acutely, furiously and painfully aware of the absence of creative agency I feel in my urbanized life. The absence of nature renders me dizzy and disempowered. I tried to shake off this numbness in making an altar today—an altar for all women, an altar to honor our collective anger and loss. I am a woman. And what happens to nature happens to me. I am not only nurturing, I am malevolent. In this, we fight back.

Here again, it seems that nature is both a catalyst and a container for my inner angst. The winter weather may seem unsympathetic, yet it holds immense strength and resilience in its capacity to contain pain until it is ready to be released and felt again. This time of intense emotion was proceeded by a period of incubation, where I left the art-making

process for a time, abandoning any strict adherence to the work. I needed a break, and it was during this time, one unexpected morning when a new awareness arose through me.

Illumination in the city

Early one March morning I awoke in a pool of sunlight. I felt like a warm loaf of bread nestled in the oven of my bed, watching as this bright sunlight streamed through the white linen curtains that hung from my window. This welcome warmth offered respite from recent days of frozen rain. Yet amidst this generous glow of natural light, I began to feel distracted, uneasy and strange. Bringing closer attention to this state, I recognized it as an overwhelming feeling of anxiety. Moved by my anxious ache, I climbed out of bed, found clothes and shoes, and made my way down the steep stairs of our third floor apartment. Early morning traffic greeted me as I confronted the clusters of green garbage bags awaiting pick-up on our curb. Instinctively I searched for some sign of spring, but aside from the sunshine, there was none to be seen. The highway was visible as a stiff cement streak through the sky, its presence unrelenting.

After walking for a time through broken paths and worn brick buildings, I found myself in a clearing beside a canal. My heart stirred seeing that the frozen water was giving way to spring; its edges melted away under the heat of the sun. I watched where the ice had broken to reveal moving water. The gentle lapping rang in my ears – opening up spaces that had been recently asleep in me. This spaciousness filled me up with a sense of freshness and relief. The snow was crunchy beneath my feet and the sun had suspended itself brilliantly in the blue-white of the early morning sky. I felt grateful. There was mostly quiet here, the hum of the highway buzzed in the background, but my

senses were totally tuned to the warmth of the sun, and the brilliance of the snow and ice that surrounded me.

I found a dry place on a lone picnic table. Its bench had been exposed by the heat of the sun and now revealed brown peeling paint on weathered wood. I sat down and stayed that way for a long time, my eyes closed, occasionally aware of people passing by. I listened while footsteps approached, became louder, passed by, and faded away. I could hear a dog bounding through the deep snow. I imagined him with snowy paws and a long pink tongue. As I sat for a while longer, the anxiety I had felt upon awakening grew. Gradually, this uneasiness spread through me, drowning me in a deep wave of sadness. Even my bones seemed to buckle under the weight. My spine sagged, and my chest caved in. Then my head dropped as quiet tears grew into deeper choking coughs and sobs. Under the glorious sun of this March morning, I began to absorb a new awareness. In this moment, I was confronted with a painful reality I had denied for a long time – the deep, honest, and felt realization that the planet is dying.

After two years of training in art therapy, and 26 years of living, an opening arrived in this moment. Something had shifted in me enough to allow this grief and despair to surface, so that while sitting on a peeling picnic table I was offered a heartfelt connection to the earth, to its grief and pain, and to my own. In this painful realization I experienced a bridge back to the source, now made conscious, that spurred my research in the first place. Earth was revealing itself to me -- not only as the source of life and inspiration, but as the embodiment of death.

From this time on, I feel my process took on greater depth and honesty. My emotional experience became a source of insight beyond the many books I had read, and

the intuitive interest I had taken in the subject itself. It felt as if a merging took place in this moment – a merging of me and Earth; a merging of my own pain and the pain of the planet as deeply, undeniably, interconnected. Hence, I felt initiated in my experience not only *of* nature, but *as* nature. I had come to a place of recognizing "that earth is as much in us as we are in/of it" (Sheridan & Pineault, 1997, p. 63). So what to do with this new found reservoir of emotion? It was as if I had opened the lid of a bucket containing my most raw and repressed awareness. Now that the lid was off, there was no going back. In my awareness, I had shed my ignorance and moved into a painful and deeply honest place. And from this, my hunger for nature persisted while my perception had changed. I was seeing, and feeling, the world anew.

Observational drawings

Wrestling with my experience of nature in this way culminated not only in images of aggression and disintegration, but also in well-integrated drawings which reveal themselves as striking and beautiful in their darkness. Image 12 and 13 are both observational drawings, executed in direct response to my surroundings. Image 12 depicts a forest of aspen trees during the winter. I executed this while in southern Alberta—working in a studio space surrounded by a grove of large aspens. Aspen trees are a powerful catalyst for my own creative process, as they are a species of trees with which I have strong associations. They are native to Alberta, and the sight of them triggers rich sensory memories for me. My life experience over time with these trees has made me intimately acquainted with their smell and texture. So, in my mind, seeing them is a multi-sensory experience. Charcoal and paper are intuitive choices for me—the large

Image 12

Image 13

paper allows me to work on a large scale, while compressed charcoal is extremely responsive to variations in pressure. It offers me the opportunity to create many variations of line quality, and it makes rich, dark marks unattainable with other kinds of graphite or charcoal. Working with this burnt wood brings me back to a deeply felt connection with the earth and its cycles of life and death. Image 13 was executed in direct response to a bouquet of dying tulips I placed on the floor of my studio to work from. Again, I chose to work with compressed charcoal, while incorporating a small amount of color with dry pastel. In both these images, the darkness is palpable, which makes the lightness bold and bright in comparison. Drawing overlaps with intuitive mark-making as I often found myself smearing and pressing with my fingers, abandoning the stick of charcoal itself as it crumbled beneath my hand.

Comparatively, times of upheaval in the presence of nature were also punctuated by times of peaceful calm and concentration. In this way, observational drawings also acted to capture the peace I feel in the presence of nature. The watercolor images (Images 14, 15) are representative of my own reverence for the beauty of nature and all creation. Tulips in their brilliance and simplicity provided heartfelt inspiration for a series of watercolors such as these:

> *To draw from observation. Tulips. Opening opening up in me—wide open, unblocked and flowing. From observation to making it my own. Internalizing the shape and contour and energetic substance of tulip petals—sloping, curving, holding, protecting, cradling, cupped like hands. It is all body. In the process of becoming. Calms me to work with water. ... Nature triggers. These tulips spark the light in me. They provide a point and place of focus. Their aliveness awakens*

Image 14

Image 15

me and my creativity. I must paint when I see them. The flowers, color, shape, familiar. Sitting with the tulips makes me feel myself differently. I do become a tissue of senses. The cells of my body resonate with these smooth sensuous pink-red petals. This pleases me. Watercolor shuts out the noise outside. Stimulates my sense in such a new way apart from the drudge outside. Inside is living, colorful, passionate and so very much alive. To get to know the things themselves.

Through the act of observing and drawing them, a conversation took place between me and these tulips. Using water introduced a measure of peace and calm, while the brilliant color reminded me of my own skin, my own energy. The practice of painting with watercolors often takes on a meditative quality for me, as it demands careful attention and control in guiding the flow of the water-based pigment.

On another trip out 'into' nature, I collected sticks, and made observational sketches from them in my studio (Images 16-19). In this case, I chose to use only pure graphite and white oil pastel. There is little color. I enjoyed the minimalism of drawing in winter with no color. The action of rendering a response was stripped down and immediate. Some of my observations after the experience, as I drew:

Art. This is how I assert who I am. Nature. With it, amidst it, my senses are relieved and soothed by the contours I see. Depth resonates. There are no straight lines. Everything is alive. The veil softens and ripples in the breeze. Reality is nothing. It falls away easily like a breath of wind in passing. A deeper truth is revealed. Everything is more than it seems. We all inhabit this spaciousness. Within the laws and natural order, there is also an inherent boundlessness. My

Image 16

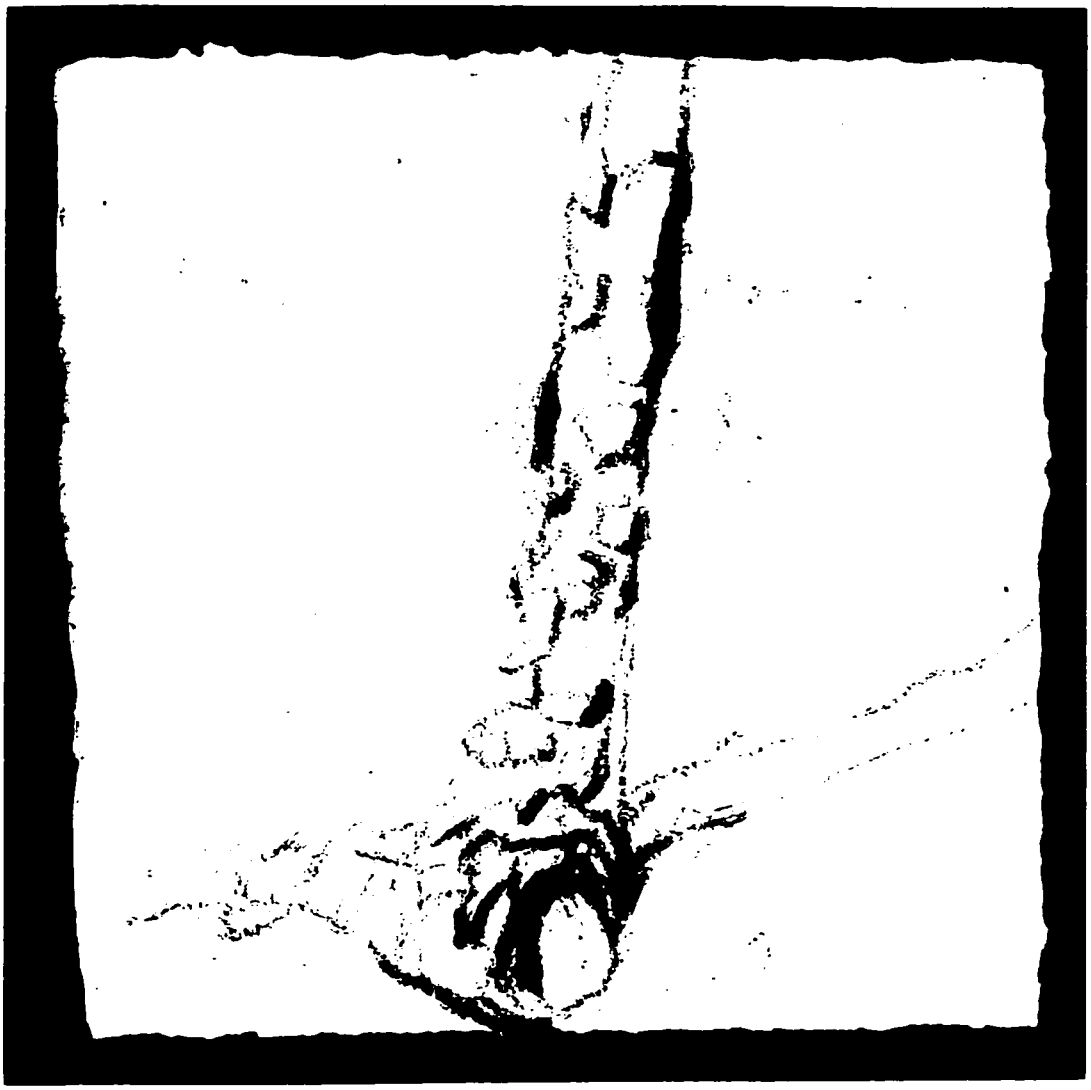


Image 17

Image 18

Image 19

senses sense this when away from the confines of the city. Rolling hills, drifts of snow, a branch against the sky. All remind me of what really is growth and change and movement and variety. We are all different, beautiful parts of the same whole. We have this home in common.

Despite not being fully immersed in a natural environment, I discovered that drawing from component parts of nature offers a window into a larger experience of the natural world. Tulips and branches provided a bridge to the experience of nature, and instilled in me a sense of calm connectedness.

Natural materials

A breakthrough, an experience of "illumination" arrived in my painting when, one night, I abandoned my paintbrushes and began using sticks instead. Image 20 is a detail of the large painting I was working on while I began this experiment. As I dipped the thin branches into black acrylic paint, I found myself excited and delighted by the way this transformed the marks I was making on canvas. Working with the branches also provided an element of risk and helplessness, as the marks were determined by the shape and sturdiness of the branches, not by my conscious intention. The sticks broke unexpectedly, and this demanded that I pay extra attention to the pressure I exerted, and the quality of line I sought to achieve. In this process, the act of painting became a joint effort—a reciprocal relationship in which I was forced to relinquish control, and eventually, self-criticism:

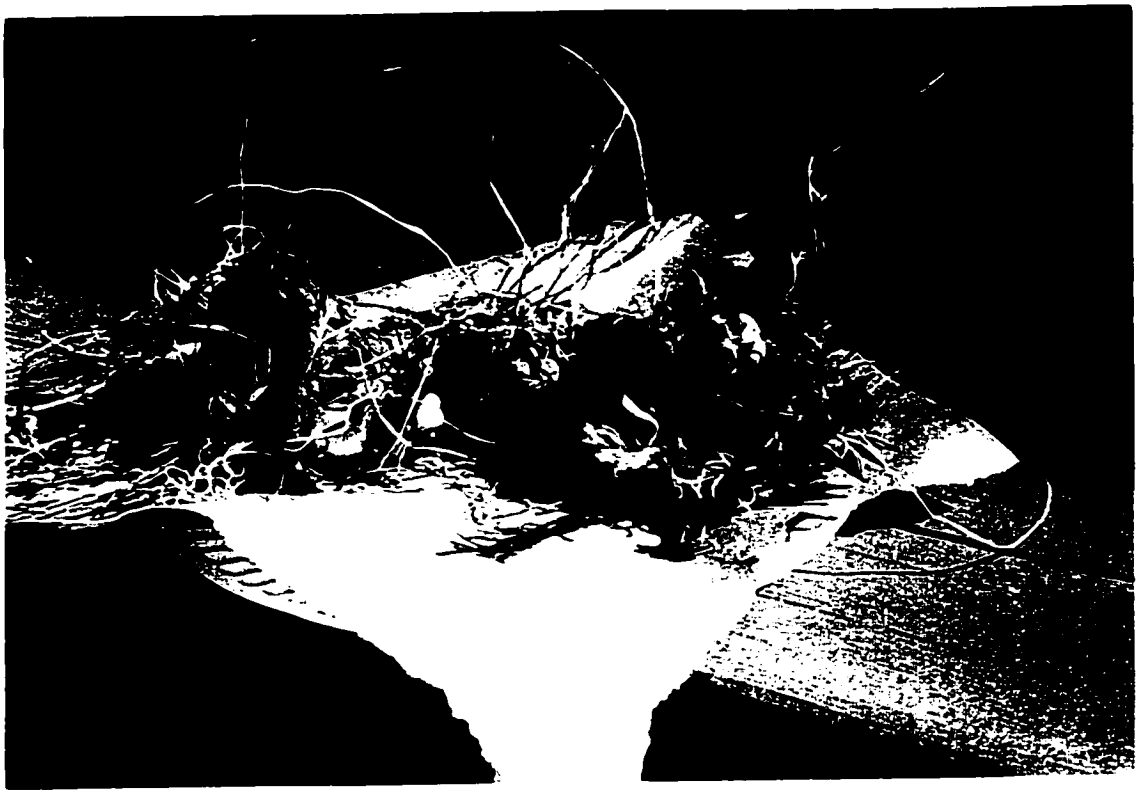
It's the sticks themselves that provide me with the marks I want to make. When they break I am reminded of the fragility of life. They do not strive for perfection they move with and as what they are. Each stick provides something unique as

Image 20

itself. In this way, my tool always changes. And in holding the stick in my hand I am connected to the energy, the substance, the earth it is. I can see where it all comes from. It is the essential bridge that keeps me close to the essence of nature throughout my painting process. I hold it all in my hand.

Through this process, the paint-dipped branches (which I had collected months earlier while walking to work) acted as an extension of my hand, just as I myself became an extension of nature—a creative appendage of this earthly imperative. In weeks that would follow, working with clay and other natural materials provided an even deeper felt connection of myself *as* nature during the creative process.

My attendance at the 2002 International Expressive Arts Therapies Association Conference provided me with an opportunity to explore my personal interest in nature and art in a guided workshop setting. Images 21 and 22 are both images documenting art objects I made while at the conference. Image 21 depicts a clay sculpture I rendered after a guided meditation and nature walk; while image 22 shows a box I constructed in another workshop. Both experiences provided me with a deep felt sense of immersion in the natural environment—an experience that was heightened by virtue of using primarily natural materials in the execution of these works. I found that working with natural materials simultaneously provided an experience of going within and stepping without. It became an experience of reciprocity with both my inner self and the outer environment; it offered the experience of feeling grounded in the material world, and while in communion with nature I felt myself expand beyond my own interiority and reach into the realm of collective expression. It seemed that in using natural materials, I was



Images 21 and 22

speaking not only for me, but allowing the materials to speak for themselves. Nature gained a voice through the clay, dried grasses, pinecone and rose petals. And while working, the materials themselves felt alive—a stark contrast from working with inert materials of primed canvas, manufactured oil pastel, glue and corrugated cardboard. This was nature in its purest form.

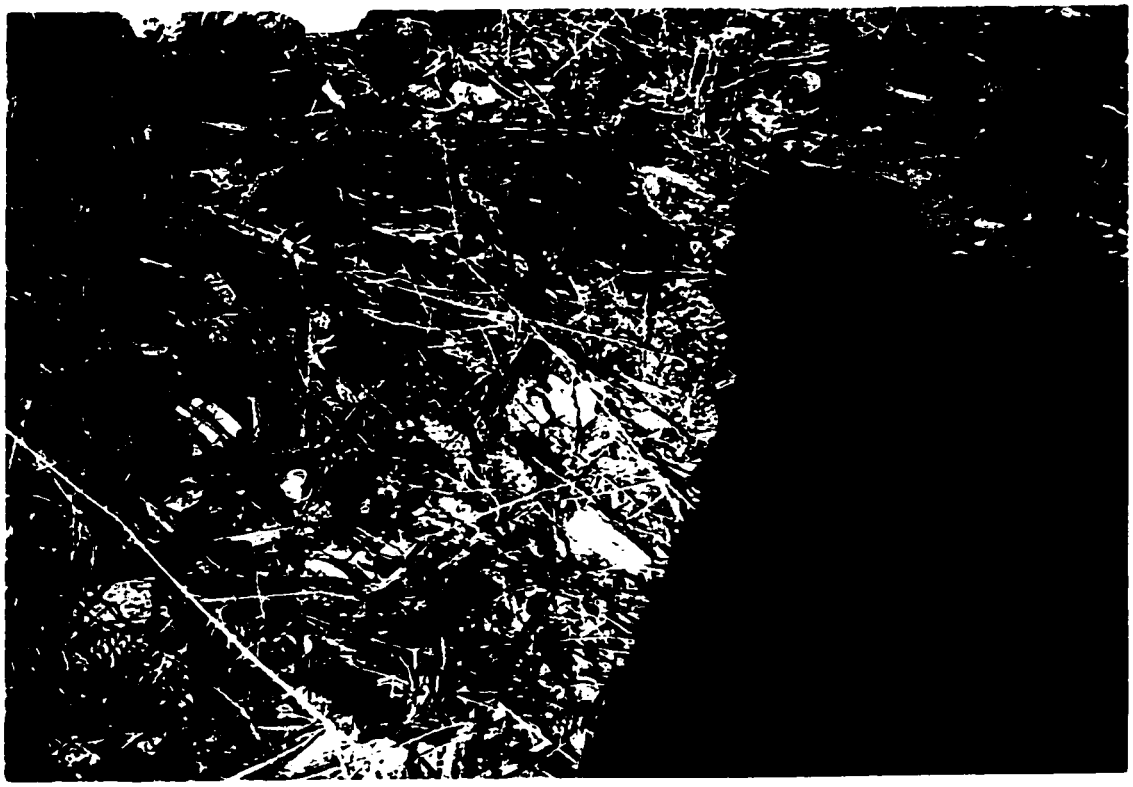
Interestingly, it is worth noting that it took a structured, guided setting for me to engage more deeply with natural materials and my felt response to the earth. This may also have been facilitated by my familiarity with the landscape in Banff, and my sense of kinship with this landscape I had grown up loving. Before this time, entering completely *into* the landscape of Quebec had proven difficult for me.

A meditation in nature

Despite my desire to work *with* and *in* nature for this research project, I was surprised to realize my ambivalence about going outdoors while in Montreal. In this setting, I found it much harder not only to get outdoors, but to engage with my surroundings once I was there. The city just didn't speak to me. The weather seemed harsh. In comparison, I felt called to get outdoors while visiting the foothills and rocky mountains of Alberta, no matter what the season. I found winter to offer its own beauty and magnetic pull, while spring offers up the freshness of life bursting to be seen. The snowy peaks and barren trees called to me just as much as the sunlight and spring grasses do. Yet whether eager or ambivalent, once I got out *into* nature I repeatedly encountered depth and delight in the sheer variety of all I met.

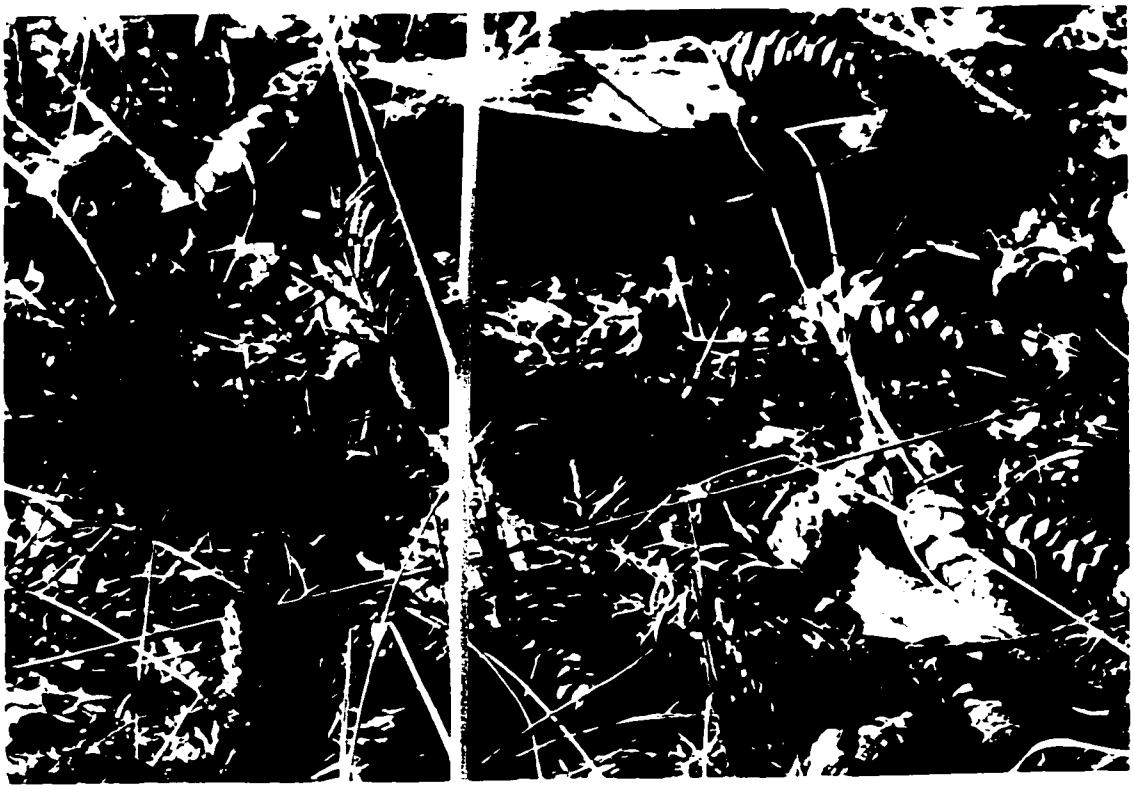
Furthermore, I realized that a sense of place, of safety, of familiarity, of *home*, was significant for me. My visit to Banff highlighted this. The final series of images

(Images 23-31) document a walk I took while in Banff at the IEATA conference. They depict the oscillations of my attention as I walked through the forest. Just as I seek to do through art, this meditative walk (with a camera) became a means for me to reclaim my relationship with nature. The camera helped me to see it—close up and far away. Image 23 begins at a distance, and the flow of the photos shows an attention to the particular, as well as a retreat to view the larger whole. I was first drawn to the subtle patterns of the groundcover (Images 24-26)—pinecones and long grasses, leaves from last fall scattered underneath gravel. Next to catch my attention was the bark of a spruce tree (Image 27)—I noticed the sap starting to run, and ran the palm of my hand over the ridges of its bark. A glimpse of green became the next focus of my attention (Image 28) before I stood back to notice the broader view from where I stood (Image 29). As I turned away from this glorious view, my eyes gravitated again towards the ground (Image 30). Even this deer scat made for a fascinating discovery along the way. The final image (Image 31) I took at the end of my walk, as I approached the road again. Looking down, my attention was caught by the hoof print of a large elk. In the photograph, one can see how the contour of the elk's hoof meets with a tire tread from one of the large maintenance vehicles on site. Banff is one of few places left where wildness awaits around every corner. In this community, mule deer and grizzly bears inhabit the same valley that sees itself overrun with tourists every year. In this special place, human and non-human co-exist every day. People grow accustomed to seeing the large elk roaming the town site, while the elk have become de-sensitized to cars and the threat posed by human presence. This precarious situation reveals the reality of our interdependence explicitly. It displays how we all living in this earth together—simultaneously inhabiting the shared space of nature.



Images 23 and 24

Images 25 and 26



Images 27 and 28

Images 29 and 30

Image 31

The experience of silence during this walk became a third presence with me and my environment. In it, much communication took place unspoken, and made room for a new realm of experience. In this way, it reminds me of the experience of therapy, as a place where shared space of the non-verbal variety is equally as pregnant and meaningful as any spoken exchange. Being in nature instills in me a deep-seated respect for silence.

Summary

In many of my creative pursuits, nature acts as my point of departure. Repeated encounters with nature have filled my imagination with imagery, shape, form, color and texture from various natural beings. It provides basic forms, pattern and structure when I work spontaneously with no direct reference, it informs my encounters to my environment, it compels me to respond and create, and it offers new and unpredictable sources of mark-making and spontaneous expression.

I began the process of heuristic inquiry in my studio making small 'art cards' in which imagery from nature naturally arose. As I continued to work in the studio, objects from nature that I collected served as subject matter for various observational drawings and paintings. While it seemed relatively effortless to work indoors with natural objects, I remained hesitant to spend real, focused time *in* nature. As the weather got colder in Montreal, I became less and less inclined to work out-of-doors. The ice was unappealing. The 'bad' weather demanded my own active participation, not only in the discomfort of weather, but in my own inner raininess or muddiness (Harper, 1995). When I did go outdoors, my experience was often unexpected—nature was at times comfortable, other times, confrontational. Experience in nature triggered feelings of longing as despair, as well as feelings of comfort and security. And my relationship with nature took on new

dimensions in this process—it came to hold the familiar and the unknown, I experienced it as both threatening and soothing, immediate and timeless. Having been confronted with the cold and unyielding force of nature in winter, allowed me to recognize what is harsh and cold within myself as well. Images and experiences of wholeness became more frequent, once I overcame my resistance to incorporating the "dark" side of nature as part of myself. After this time, having permission to be many things beyond good and beautiful, I felt more at ease in my own process, and gained a new openness to my experience in nature.

Chapter 5

Emergent themes

I began this paper with a call to nature—a call for bringing nature into the realm of art therapy as a context for creative experience, a call for the reinsertion of nature into our psychological, creative and cultural lives. Over the course of this research, I have reviewed some of the literature relevant to this topic while using my own experience in nature to reflect upon its impact on my own creative processes. Hence, I chose to seek out links between my own creative experience and the natural world, in hopes of applying my personal findings to possible theoretical and practical links between the field of art therapy and realm of ecopsychology. Having presented the 'core' materials of my experience in chapters 1 through 4, this chapter is an opportunity to now make links between the academic literature and my own heuristic experience, and to tease out themes that have evolved and emerged as significant in this work.

Interconnection and integration

The initial motivation behind my heuristic research inquiry was a desire to integrate the fields of art therapy and ecopsychology. I wanted to find a way to integrate my love of nature with my work and research as an art therapist. Upon reflection, I can see how the initial stages of my heuristic inquiry were characterized by this quest for integration. At this time, the themes of interconnectedness and integration figured prominently in my mind's eye, and endless connections between the fields of art therapy, psychology and ecology seemed to surface at this time. While investigating literature in the field of ecopsychology I felt excited and encouraged by this emphasis on interconnectedness, as it seemed an important meeting point for my interests in nature,

human relationships, and art-making. While ecopsychology calls for a view of the world as interconnected, and presents a strong argument for developing psychotherapy as a nature-based practice (Burns, 1998, Conn, 1995, Devereux, 1996, Reynolds, 1995, Roszak, 1992), the field of psychotherapy, while not making the human-nature relationship explicit, is deeply rooted in an awareness of human relationships (Mitchell & Black, 1995, Winnicott, 1971). Furthermore, it is well-accepted that the laws governing perception and art-making depend upon the interconnections perceived between various elements of line, space, and color. In this way, the process of making art, as well as our perception of the final product is very much determined by the interrelationship of various elements (Arnheim, 1954). Hence, the theme of interconnectedness seemed an important meeting point for my interests in human relationships, the creative process, and the natural world—all of which imply connections between various elements, be they people, formal shapes and colors, or living organisms.

Impermanence and disintegration

Although the themes of integration and interconnectedness figured prominently in my own sensibilities since the onset of the research process, this emphasis shifted as I began to experience my own disillusionment with nature. My experience of nature changed—becoming more tumultuous and unexpected. My illusions were challenged as I encountered the more "autonomous" aspects of nature—wind, weather and a natural environment I was unfamiliar with. What I had assumed to be my intimate relationship with all things natural began to disintegrate as nature also presented itself as unfamiliar, diabolical and strange.

Accordingly, as I proceeded along in the heuristic process, this sense of connectedness was at times completely absent, replaced instead by a sense of unease, of confusion, disorientation, anger, dissolution. At such times I felt myself beginning to dissolve, boundaries of myself began to breakdown. The sense of impermanence and self-disintegration put into action a process of reality testing (Winnicott, 1971) for me. In this way, the theme of impermanence came to figure more prominently in my heart and mind, as I further contemplated the flow and fluidity of life, creativity and the natural world. My previous perception of nature as familiar and soothing receded as I encountered a 'new' nature around me. My illusions were dissolving in a new realm of experience.

It follows then, that the themes of interconnectedness and impermanence both emerged as prominent in my process of heuristic inquiry. It is also worth noting that it was not until late into the process that the concept of impermanence truly took hold in my mind. Up until this time I had held on closely to the notion of interdependence as the primary focus of my investigation. Luckily, in allowing the heuristic research process to carry on according to its own organic, fluid nature, a new insight emerged, investing this work with a more balanced perspective of the ideas at hand.

Illusion and disillusionment: The intermediate realm

In her article *The ecopsychology of child development*, Barrows (1995) makes links between the field of ecopsychology and Winnicott's theory of object relations, in suggesting that nature actually serves as our first "holding environment". She describes her encounters with nature as having "been identical for me with being held, permitt[ing] me a free flow of creative energy that being indoors often doesn't" (p. 105).

Interestingly, this perspective of Barrows' echoes the perspective I held at the onset of this process. When I first encountered Barrow's statement, I considered it a moment of illumination. Her words articulated feelings I shared deeply. Yet for me this initial perspective has been tempered over time. While Barrows' statement (1995) does present an insightful and valuable link to Winnicott's theory of object relations, it also presents an idealized view of nature by focusing primarily upon the nurturing, secure and protective aspects of the natural world. I recognize this idealization in my own experience. But in developing links to psychological theory it seems important to incorporate not only nature's soothing and protective qualities, not only the felt experience of creativity and interconnectedness but to invite in her more vehement forces—her inherent unpredictability, her volatility and impermanence. In doing so, these "less nurturing" aspects of the natural world may give us an even richer psychological framework from which to work. This leads us to a discussion of the processes of illusion and disillusionment (Winnicott, 1971).

Over the course of my own heuristic investigation, there came a time when I was confronted with the "illusion" of my own assumptions about nature as I experienced these "less nurturing" aspects of nature. This period of disillusionment gave way to feelings of anger, confusion and disorientation, during which I struggled to find the "nature" that I once knew. As I continued to seek out the soothing, peaceful experiences amidst nature, my own illusions were challenged and my reality was tested. My illusion of nature as soothing and good gave way to a period of disillusionment during which I was confronted with the more volatile aspects of the natural world. This brings us to Winnicott's theory of illusion-disillusionment (1971). In *Playing and reality* (1971),

Winnicott discusses the value of illusion as it relates to transitional phenomena in a child's early development. He suggests that "from birth...the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of" (1971, p. 11). He then goes on to describe this phenomenon as taking place within the "intermediate area... the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing" (p. 11).

According to Winnicott (1971), play and early life experiences act as the precursors to cultural experience. Furthermore, he states that both play and cultural experience neither belong exclusively to the domain of either inner psychic reality not external reality. In fact, play and cultural experience occur at the intersection of both inner *and* outer experience as an "intermediate area of *experiencing,* to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (p. 2). Over the course of my process, I felt at times as if I was straddling two worlds—the outer reality of nature I was "seeing", and the inner representations of nature I had created through my years of experience amidst it. This felt deeply strange, as my external life failed to mirror the "nature" I held within. Until this point, my inner representations of nature—the mountains, clear sky, open spaces, sensuousness and silence—had been mirrored back at me while I lived in Alberta. Upon moving to inner city Montreal, my inner representations of nature had become incoherent with my outer reality. The hills of the Laurentians and the urban waterways were unrecognizable to my inner version of what nature was. Tension surfaced and writhed in my writing and artwork as I struggled to resolve the disintegration I was experiencing.

According to his theory, Winnicott suggests that "no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion etc.)" (1971, p.13). In this way, Winnicott not only emphasizes the importance of going through periods of disillusionment, but he conceptualizes a place in which this actually occurs—a realm he calls the "intermediate" or "third area" of experience. He offers up this realm as a place of respite--of relief from the tension of inner and outer, as a place to play and to allow paradoxical elements to meet and mingle. Accordingly, Winnicott suggests that this third realm affords the individual an opportunity to experience both inner and outer reality, to negotiate the "me" and the "not-me", to experience both separateness and union (1971). Furthermore, he states that neither play nor cultural experience belong exclusively to the domain of inner psychic reality or to that of external reality.

Interestingly, Winnicott does not limit the existence of this intermediate realm to any particular stage of development. He states that "throughout life [the intermediate area] is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (p. 14). This has significant implications for clinical work in art therapy as it supports the notion that we require this creative realm throughout life, not only in our early stages of development. He goes on to suggest that this intermediate area, or potential space, "can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living" (p. 103). This sacred space of creative living has also been addressed in concepts such as creative "flow"(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996), flow is a state of egolessness, where one forgets the self and is motivated purely by the pleasure of

doing. It is characterized by feelings of joy, rapture and sharpness of attention. Winnicott refers to such a state of flow as characteristic of the "near-withdrawl state" (p. 51) seen in young children immersed in play. It follows then, that no matter what our developmental age, we can benefit from experiencing this intermediate realm of fluidity and play.

Winnicott believes that culture and creativity arise out of this third area. He names the arts and religion as belonging to this intermediate realm. However, what if we were to expand Winnicott's notion of cultural experience to include *nature*? In doing so, it seems we could add another infinitely valuable dimension to our understanding of this third area. For example, my own experience *in nature* became just that—a realm where the "me" and the "not-me" could mingle and co-exist, where I felt both a sense of belonging and of alienation, where I felt a sense of universal connectedness amidst nature's infinite diversity. Where I could tap into this "flow". While I mostly knew myself to be distinct from my surroundings, I also at times experienced a kind of transcendent state, during which I felt myself *as* nature. Hence, Winnicott's focus on this "intermediate realm" or "third area" of experience can serve to move us beyond a simplified concept of nature as a 'holding environment', while taking us to a broader definition of nature as an entire realm of cultural experience (Winnicott, 1971). It follows then, that in the context of my own heuristic research inquiry, I am suggesting that *nature* be included within this realm of cultural experience—that we consider Winnicott's "cultural realm" (1971) as the place in our consciousness, in our imaginations, where nature resides.

Unexpected findings: A changing view of nature

In reviewing the emergent themes of my process, it seems important to re-visit a question I put forth at the beginning of this paper--how do I conceptualize nature? At the onset of my heuristic inquiry, I was guided by a belief that nature is inherently healing, and hence a good and essential component of human experience. However, as the heuristic process unfolded and deepened, my experience in nature became at times de-stabilizing, startling and difficult to accept. I felt overwhelmed by the cold, dark and unsympathetic qualities I was experiencing in nature. This inner angst was made more tangible as it surfaced in my creative responses to the "nature" I was experiencing. At times, my artwork revealed the dark and foreboding presence of nature—steering away from representational color, renderings of joyful landscapes or component parts of nature, to become less inhibited, harsher and darker. In this way, my experience in nature, and of nature—as examined through the lens of heuristic inquiry served to broaden my perception of the natural world, as a place of paradox, not merely a source of healing and respite. In so doing, my expanded relationship with nature has emerged as a metaphor for my ability to integrate paradoxical components of myself, and to internalize the harshness of nature just as much as I take solace in internalizing its colors, pattern, textures and beauty.

As I first approached my study of nature, I did so in anticipation of re-discovering all that was good, beautiful and regenerative in the natural world. I was expecting to find what I had found many times before. But this heuristic inquiry proved to be very different. I encountered, at times, a "nature" I did not know. I was confronted with the darkness of the nature I saw outside of myself, in the form of barren trees, snow covered

paths, and frozen water; while I was also confronted with part of my inner nature—the anger, resentment, and sense of loss that had been, up until this point, unfamiliar to me. In this process, the winter months figured prominently in my experience of nature, as it presented a time in the cycle when nature is not in bloom, not visibly flourishing or even growing. Yet ironically, this "absence" of growth in nature over the winter provided me with a deeply felt experience of personal growth from within. Perhaps there is a metaphor here as both nature and I turned inwards through the wintertime—attending to our inner growth in preparation for a new cycle of regeneration. The notion of interconnectedness slowly gave way to an awareness of impermanence. Both themes were prevalent for me as nature remained an ever-changing entirety—numinous and heinous, creative and destructive, comforting and ruthless. Through my experience and my artwork, nature revealed itself to be much more complex than I had been willing to acknowledge at the onset of this process.

Summary

In looking to the psychological literature, Winnicott's theory of the intermediate realm (1971) offers a theoretical framework for examining the cultural and creative realm of human existence. His description of this intermediate realm as the location of art and religion has led me to examine this definition from an ecopsychological perspective. In doing so, I suggest that we must include *nature* as a fundamental component of this "third realm" of experiencing—a realm where the "me" and the "not-me" can mingle in symbolic interaction. It follows then, that in expanding Winnicott's theory to provide for the experience of nature, we will undoubtedly add another valuable dimension to our understanding of this third area.

Chapter 6

Future directions

We need a cultural life that includes nature. Doing so requires that we acknowledge nature as part of our realm of "cultural experience" (Winnicott, 1971), as a place where illusion and reality can co-exist, where the "strain of relating inner and outer reality" (1971, p. 13) can be relieved. From this perspective, nature, as an intermediate area of experiencing, exists as an entity neither good nor bad, but as a place where paradox and contradiction remain. In this way, nature might offer a therapeutic continuum of potential experience—ranging from a place for fantasy, projection and illusion, to an environment whose extremes might also trigger necessary feelings of confusion and disillusionment. I would argue that nature's potency as a context for experience resides in its diversity and universality, as well as offering material evidence of paradox and contradiction. Observing an ant colony as it swarms over the decaying body of a cedar tree reminds us that death provides sustenance and shelter to the living. A blood-red sunrise and pink-gold sunset put us in touch daily with the transience of life in the same way that I experience my cultural and *natural* heritage each time I rub the rock I collected from the beach near my grandfather's house.

So, say we start to think about nature in a new way. We include it in our cultural history, we admit to having a natural heritage. Theoretically, we may even begin to consider it as this "intermediate realm" where contradictions co-exist. But such a notion will die quickly if not realized in the realm of direct and personal experience. If we don't walk amidst it, play with it, smell and touch and breathe it, our knowledge of nature remains superficial and impersonal. So beyond merely *thinking* about nature in a new

way, we must also seek out tangible ways in which we can bring nature back into our cultural *practice;* to enter into the realm of "deep play" whose spirit is that of spontaneity and discovery (Ackerman, 1999).

Art therapy is one place where we can begin to do this. In therapy, we aim to create a "framework for freedom" (Rubin, 1978)—we work to build a safe space where clients can freely explore inner conflicts, and where the tension of inner states can be relieved through creativity, exploration and play. And while insight may be one outcome of treatment, the main goal of psychotherapy is to provide symptom relief and positive behavior change (Weiner, 1998). In this way, the therapeutic climate is not merely a space for *thinking* differently, it is a place to *act* differently—to experience oneself and ones environment differently. As stated by Winnicott (1971), the intermediate area is one of *experiencing*, it is an area of play, creative living and cultural life. In the context of art therapy, this realm of experiencing may involve bringing in photographs of nature for clients to contemplate, or natural materials for them to work with. On a larger scale, this cultural, or natural experience may occur through actually working *in* a natural setting—be it a city park or a wilderness area. Whether careful and intimate, or deep and immersive, nature offers great therapeutic potential as an intermediate realm of experience.

In this intermediate realm of experience, infinite metaphors may arise—triggered by our experience of nature. In this way, the connections inherent in the natural world can act as a metaphor for the relationships we share with other people, places and creatures, as well as highlighting the role that change does, and must play in the larger cycle of life. As such, we can look to nature for comfort, reassurance and insight into the

challenges and changes we face everyday—from the inside out. Furthermore, perceiving the world in metaphors can act as a valuable tool for enlarging our worldview. Being with nature has helped me to do this, as it came to act as a template, a model, a grand metaphor for issues that arose within me, and hence may arise in therapeutic situations, and in larger life for others. Sewall (1998) suggests that communicating in metaphors lends depth to our experience because metaphors have the capacity to bring together previously unrelated realms in a meaningful way. Making metaphors demands that we engage our imaginations to see new connections between elements that were previously considered unrelated. In this way, making the link between nature and the self can offer a potent source of rich, metaphorical meaning. Metaphors may also be a means of clarifying the experience of nature for clients in a therapeutic context. Because nature offers "infinite possibilities for projection and learning" (Fox, 2000, p. 94) it seems important to maintain a point of reference for the experience, and seeking out metaphors within the experience may serve to contain and ground the experience of nature in a more secure way.

An expanded sense of self

At the onset of my research, I had one idea of nature. In defining 'nature' as the mountains, rivers, parks and skies I had grown up loving, I was unconsciously assuming that this version, *my* version, was the only version. In this way, my experiences *in* nature had shaped my perception *of* nature, and I came to consider nature as soothing, inspiring and good. My bias meant that in categorizing nature as good and beautiful, I was also relegating city life to the bad, polluted and indifferent. Yet over the course of this heuristic inquiry, nature also presented me with the bad, the harsh and the indifferent. I

felt darkness, destruction and death in nature. I felt these emotions within myself. Consequently, nature took on a complexity for me that it didn't have before. It became rich with contradictions and came to confuse me in its harshness and beauty, its grandeur and fragility. Through my own immersion in the natural world, nature revealed itself to me as a living paradox. Furthermore, I came to appreciate the context of nature as it revolves around both life and death. It does not hold one above the other, as death and decay are as natural and necessary as the seasons of growth and regeneration. The realization that emerged for me was that I, as part of the natural world, also embody the seasons and paradoxes inherent in nature. Seeing the harsh and diabolical side of the natural world was difficult at first, however in acknowledging this, it gave me a sense of freedom and belonging. I too could contain contradictions. I too could be many things at once. Nature's complexity and diversity mirrored my own. And over the course of the research process, I became less preoccupied with simplifying and narrowing down a definition of nature. In so doing, I felt a greater capacity to tolerate my own uncertainties and changing moods. It occurred to me that if nature can contain all these opposites—remaining beautiful and harsh, cold and comforting, than so could I. And I began to feel a more authentic sense of myself emerging—as a more complete, albeit complex self-concept started to surface.

It has been said that art-making is ultimately the act of re-arranging elements of the natural world (Henderson, 1999). As my senses have come alive through this in-depth process of heuristic research, I feel I have re-arranged not only elements of the natural world, but my entire experience of it. Through making art as a response to the natural world around me, I encountered buried parts of myself in the images that

surfaced. These images presented me with an increasingly complex version of nature, rich with multiple contradictions, rich with beauty, subtlety and novelty. The paradoxical truths revealed to me through my experience with nature have enabled me to tolerate my own inner contradictions more gracefully. This is helping me to experience myself more honestly and more authentically, while training me to pay closer attention to the parts and places of life I would rather not see. This exercise of being confronted and immersed in the complex variations of nature, has given me practice in truly seeing through my immediate biases, while helping to recognize areas where I am often too "short-sighted". It has provided me with a new respect for the complexity of my own experience of nature, and the implications this might have for the clients I choose to bring into nature.

Expanding the practice of therapy

The practice of psychotherapy has been described as "the communication of person-related understanding, respect and a desire to be of help" (Weiner, 1998, p. 4). I would venture to add that the practice of psychotherapy is ultimately a creative pursuit—as it affords the client an opportunity to re-vision themselves and their experiences in a new way. Kramer (2000) presents therapy as a creative pursuit in suggesting that the practice of art therapy demands an artistic sensitivity to the subtleties of artwork and of human behavior. In this way, by including *art* in the description of therapy, the practice of art therapy makes this implicit connection to creativity explicit. In this way, the creative climate of art therapy may also make more room for the complexity of human emotion. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes complexity as a hallmark of creativity. Spend any time in nature and it becomes difficult to deny the range of sensory experiences afforded to us by the natural world—as such, nature is infinite in its

complexity. It might be said then, that nature's complexity can serve to enliven our creative juices through its provision of infinite sensory experiences ranging from the majestic to the mundane, providing us with experiences of the smelly, the sensuous, and the shocking.

Re-visioning the practice of art therapy as a nature-based culture of practice demands that we begin to re-consider the practice of psychotherapy as not only a person-centered practice, but as a practice that can make use of, and potentially take place *in*, the rich sensory environment of nature. Accordingly, identifying the natural world as a significant component of our cultural realm—as an intermediate area of experiencing—implies a respect for the natural world as deeply connected to our own-well being, to our inner and outer realms of experience. Looking at the present climate of psychotherapy, it is encouraging to see that the field is expanding its awareness of this human-nature relationship, and that the creative arts therapies are also beginning to incorporate an ecological consciousness in practice. Various practitioners are further re-visioning alternatives to the traditional clinical practice of psychotherapy. In the context of ecopsychology, Conn (1998) suggests that its challenge "is to find ways for psychotherapy to respond to the empty self not by providing another way to soothe or to fill it up, but by discovering and supporting the person's unique contribution to the larger context of the earth as a living system" (p. 194). Sheridan (1997) emphasizes the importance of lived experience in biodiverse environments, as being crucial for a child to develop "an earth-centered ability for creative thought" (p. 59). Caldwell (2002) has supported the idea of nature as therapy, in suggesting that healthy trees and a healthy environment actually create an *energy field* that can "jump start" our own healing.

Harper (1995) offers a personalized approach and a radical paradigm shift in the field of psychology:

> Though I approach wilderness as a psychologist seeking to bring wholeness to the lives of those I lead out, I do not consider what I do "therapy"; I prefer the word "practice." Nature itself has shown me this crucial difference. Therapy, as it is commonly used, implies illness; it implies that there is a beginning and an end to treatment. .... On the other hand, practice implies process; there is no beginning or end, but a lifetime of engagement and discovery. When we are truly willing to step into the looking glass of nature and contact wilderness, we uncover a wisdom much larger than our small everyday selves (p. 185).

Beyond the field of ecopsychology, art therapists are incorporating this culture of nature in their clinical work. Roberts (1998) has cited how tools such as embodiment, symbolism and imagination can be used to reawaken the senses, renew connections with the natural world, while Feral (1998) employs totem selection, art therapy and nature visualization exercises in a therapeutic setting. In art therapy specifically, making metaphorical connections with the self and nature offers infinite possibilities, as this can allow clients to relate to the environment in a way that is personally relevant for them. The sheer variety of working with natural materials offers an advantage as it provides limitless possibilities for experimentation and innovation. I have also found natural materials to act as strong catalysts for story telling and reminiscing about past experiences. The strong sensory component inherent in natural materials—be it through scent, sight, taste or texture—has a potent capacity to elicit personal stories and memories that may not have surfaced otherwise. In the context of his theories of object relations,

Winnicott states (1971) "those who have care of children of all ages [must] be ready to put each child into touch with appropriate elements of the cultural heritage, according to the individual child's capacity and emotion age and developmental phase" (p. 110). It follows then, that if we consider nature as part of our cultural heritage, or as a natural heritage in its own right, than we must be prepared to put people of all ages in touch with appropriate elements of their natural heritage—as manifested in the natural world.

Questions to consider

Putting people in touch with a nature-based cultural heritage is no simple task, and must be undertaken with the utmost of care—taking into consideration prior experience (or lack of experience) in nature, while being acutely aware of the depth and intensity of the projections that may arise in doing so. Issues of containment and confidentiality also figure prominently in this work, and exercises such as art-cards, or drawing from direct observation of natural materials in the studio may serve as "safer" therapeutic interventions, perhaps leading up to an experience *in* a more natural setting. I also found it helpful to experiment with various levels of engagement with the natural world, and came to value opportunities to retreat from it and allow the experience to "incubate". Entering into a relationship with the natural world, just as with any therapeutic alliance presents some risk and threat. However the unpredictability of immersion in the natural world must not be overlooked as therapists aim to foster a safe and "facilitating environment" (Winnicott, 1971) for each client's individual development and personal growth.

Important questions to consider upon reflecting about experience in nature include: What parts of ourselves to we project on to nature? What aspects of nature (and

hence ourselves) are we inclined to "see" and to focus upon? What parts of nature (and of ourselves) do we tend to/ choose to ignore? Just as I began in asking myself this question, so it may be a valuable point of departure to keep in mind as a therapist introducing nature or natural materials as part of an art therapeutic intervention. It must be considered that some individuals will naturally feel a greater affinity for nature and be able to identify more readily with the natural world. Other possibilities may include using materials reminiscent of nature such as clay, earth colored paint, charcoal, water-based mediums in cases where making the connection to nature is less explicit. If an individual had a traumatic experience in nature for instance, it could be counter-therapeutic to demand that they engage directly with elements of the natural world. In all its complexity, nature also has the capacity to re-traumatize, not only to heal. In this case, an art therapist may do well to use this ecological context as a guiding set of values that may inform a more "traditional" clinical practice. Especially in the event of more intensive periods of wilderness experience, issues of containment and confidentiality would need to be closely examined and set out beforehand. If a therapeutic intervention was to take place in a natural setting, considerations of place, space and ritual also present important lines of investigation.

As art therapists, I believe that it is our responsibility to exist not only in relationship to our work but to work at building a responsible and *responsive* relationship to the natural world as well. Ultimately, I envision a time and place when care for the self and care for others will be seen as interchangeable with an ethic of care for the earth. And so, it is this vision that has motivated my research project—a heuristic investigation dedicated to examining my most intimate experiences of my self through my broader

experience of the natural world as a context for creative exploration. This process of discovery has raised many significant questions for me with regards to how, and where I want to practice as an art therapist. What I do know, is that in my work I need to expand the intimate and privileged therapeutic space of client, therapist and artwork to include an awareness of nature—because as a paradigm, and a context for working, nature is the materialization of connectedness, impermanence and paradox; and within each therapeutic encounter resides the potential to renew our felt connection with nature's larger web of life.

Summary

My research through my own creative process unfolded much like a story—an organic process of living with my own values, struggles and questions on a day-to-day basis. In this paper, I've chosen to detail my research inquiry chronologically—in my best attempt at staying true to the unfolding of my own experiences and values as they grew, changed and evolved. This heartfelt experience reinforced for me the importance of an ecological context for living--an ecological context being one that embodies *all* aspects of existence—life and death, darkness and light, creation and destruction. That allows us to experience the wholeness of the world we inhabit.

I found that my experience in nature, and meditations while immersed within it, lent complexity to my relationship with the natural world. At time, immersion in nature provided a catalyst for my capacity and desire to not only make art, but in doing so, to form relationships. At other times, the unexpected aspects of nature that surfaced actually paralyzed my ability to create, and made me want to retreat into myself—away from the "ugliness" I saw in nature. Despite the paradoxical interactions I experienced

with the natural world, I have been enriched by the cyclical process of returning to this crucial relationship through my times of upheaval and of inspiration. Hence, I came to feel solace not in cutting myself off from the parts of nature I didn't want to see, but in trying to relate to them in a more authentic and meaningful way. I feel that this is also a critical clinical skill in the practice of art therapy—to be able to act as a container for a client's experiences, good and bad, and to support the richness brought through in both realms. Accordingly, this heuristic inquiry has challenged me to examine the broader, and more diabolical dimension of my existence as it relates to examples in the natural world. Life and death, creation and destruction, aggression and nurturance are embodied in nature. The beautiful and the heinous co-exist—just as hunting and killing provide fuel for the newly born, rain nourishes and drowns, while the heat of the sun both feeds and starves. Winnicott may not have been thinking specifically about the beauty, ruthlessness and resilience of nature while elaborating on his theory of the intermediate area in 1971. However, if we, today, begin to consider the natural world as such an area, it follows then that we might also embrace the natural world "as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 103).

Clinically speaking, my heuristic inquiry into the experience of nature through art has provided me with a view of environments—both inner and outer—that are less than beautiful, but equally significant. My inner optimism became evident in my own projections onto nature—projections of goodness, safety, peace and beauty. Nature, in revealing itself as cold, destructive, and unsympathetic has given me permission to do the same, and in turn, to acknowledge this more readily in my work with clients. The benefit of working with nature, of using it as a context or a metaphor for clinical work, is that is

embodies the wholeness of who we are. For those who struggle to see the shadow in themselves, nature reveals. For those who are blind to the beauty of nature, caught in the fear of its unknown and frightening qualities, nature has the potential to reveal itself as numinous, supportive and grounding. Furthermore, as clinicians, researchers and clients, it seems to me that connecting to nature offers an opportunity to bring a deeper balance to our lives. A sense of balance that stems from being able to see, and eventually incorporate the paradoxical dimensions of the natural world, and in turn, the contradictions inherent within ourselves. Furthermore, the tension we so often experience between our inner worlds and outer reality may be relieved in nature as an intermediate area of experiencing the "me" and the "not me" (Winnicott, 1971). In this creative, cultural, and *natural* realm, our imaginations can take flight to incorporate all dimensions of our experience.

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