HITCHING MY HEAD TO MY HEART: A LIVED EXPERIENCE STUDY OF ECOLOGICAL EMBODIED COGNITION

By

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

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

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ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY

September 2013

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Abstract

In this autoethnographic personal narrative, I share my multifaceted journey of developing ecological embodied cognition in the context of climate change, specifically in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. Through spending time alone with the other-than-human world and using a deliberate practice of mindfulness to develop a participatory postmodern worldview, I seek to integrate multiple ways of knowing to complement my existing strengths of scientific, positivist understanding of the world. I suggest that expanding my (our) metaphoric construct of self to include ecological self, is vital to deepening sustainable relationships with nature and with other humans. I depict and evoke for readers my personal experience as a potential model of adaptation and worldview change. As environmental educator and education leader in the public school system, I will bring these new skills and ways of knowing and being to the classroom, to more meaningfully promote sustainability initiatives and behaviors.
HITCHING MY HEAD TO MY HEART

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Acknowledgements

My heartfelt gratitude and love to my family—Hans, Emma, and Ethan. I truly could not have taken this path without your support and love.

To the other-than-human world, thank you for your wisdom, your welcome, and your presence.

And thank you to Dr. Robert (Bob) Kull, for being one of the finest teachers, nay, awakeners, I have had the honor of working with.
Prologue

This is a story of a working professional with a young family who recognized that something was missing from her life—her heart. Embedded in thinking as her primary way of knowing, and working in an educational system based on reductionism and control, she felt a yearning for deeper connections and richer complexity.

The yearning pushed her to and beyond the boundaries of what she’d perceived life to be. As a science teacher aware of global climate changes, she was drawn to understand more of the adaptations in the natural world. What she didn’t realize was her own journey would soon mirror the Earth’s adaptations.

This is the story of her odyssey from a life of black and white dualities towards interwoven connections; a welcoming embrace of diverse complexity. Her life became a messy adventure, full of unmeasurable variables. Yet she learned to rest comfortably in these uncharted waters.

Undertaking this remaking of self was a daunting task, during which she lived in a daily whirlwind: parenting a four and six year old; working full time as a union leader in public education; and renovating a 70-year-old farmstead on ten acres with her husband. Reforming her self in the context of researching and writing an academic thesis provided an additional challenge, particularly as she moved beyond quantitative framing to embody many different ways of knowing. She learned to weave her emotional and personal journeys into story, with all the vulnerabilities and unchained fears that stalked her daily.

Instead of continuing to feel hunted, she changed the game.
Facing her fears, she began to know herself, and discovered experientially that self is really not there at all as an isolated entity, but rather as part of the larger whole. She began to dwell and act within the context of that larger whole, embracing her connections between heart, mind, soul and spirit, a blending of physical and metaphysical. She gently grasped the interweaving of neurochemistry and soul craft, and found herself moving to the rhythms of seasons, mountain creeks, and blinding snowfall.

Decreasingly battling life, she tentatively entered a place where her work became an expression of who she was, wherever she was, with whomever was there. Her work began an uncovering of life and the joy inherent in all our hearts, exploring compassion, joy, love and power with both the human and other-than-human world.

Her transformation began to ripple throughout her connections. Each relationship, each conversation, each word uttered invited an intentional choice of dwelling in the moment, of sensing and feeling her connection to others. Her choices affected those in her family, which affected her local community, including the educational institutions. Her choices rang softly through her soul’s connection to the Earth, and echoed through her heart and mind. And this is what she began to create: change in how we live.

~

This story is a blend of poetry, expository essay, journal entries, dramatic interviews, and personal—sometimes fictional—narratives. The various formats offer different perspectives of her journey, especially given the many passages that emerged. Photographs and drawings are embedded throughout, also indicative of the diversity and integration of multiple ways of knowing that appeared.
She became aware of several themes during the process of living and writing: frustration, confusion, and exhaustion; peacefulness, joy, and stillness; change, journey, and boundaries; connections and relationships; paradox and paradigms. Rather than divide them for separate discussion, they are intermingled and woven throughout, as they truly emerged. The adventure includes much cycling, at varying rates, and thus contains repetitiveness. For the sake of this thesis, the journals have been edited to allude to this pattern, while retaining the integrity of the journey. All the journal entries are written truthfully, even the difficult and vulnerable parts, to offer a richer view of the world as she lived it.
Chapter 1: The Problem of Self

[Nicol is seated on a stool; a spotlight focused on her. She is dressed in casual pants and zip-necked sweater. She wears glasses and her hair is in a braid. Neatly conservative, her body language exudes intensity.]

Interviewer¹: Please tell us what this is all about.

Nicol: I’ve been struggling with something for almost a decade, and I am beginning to see some illumination. I’m elated, relieved, and expectant.

Interviewer: Sounds exciting! Could you elaborate?

Nicol: In 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) decreed 2005-2014 as the “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development” (UNESCO, 2005). At that point I worked in a rural secondary school where, at the prompting of several influential people, the staff began to incorporate

¹ The use of Interviewer is representative of my phenomenological understanding; investigating my personal experience as though from the perspective of an outside viewer (Van Manen, 1990).
UNESCO’s ideas into classroom practices. Almost immediately, some began to rebel, complaining about the constant sustainability subject.

Myself, I thought UNESCO’s ideas made sense, especially concerning climate change; however, I did not feel connected to it. It felt as though I was being asked to do “one more thing” which was a regular occurrence in my professional life. I did incorporate their ideas into my teaching practice, and it did affect some students. But it wasn’t a priority and focus, and over the years I left the initiatives behind.

Personally, I tried to be excited about sustainable development and lifestyle. I recycled, composted, and cultivated a vegetable garden. I even attended a TransitionTowns workshop, designed to teach me about beginning community sustainability initiatives and positive behavioral change. I remember discussing paradigm change there. As a group, we decided choices for people needed to be so obvious that “why wouldn’t you choose to do the right thing for the planet?” I engaged in all of these activities with generated enthusiasm. I was participating out of duty. Caring for the environment was the responsible thing to do.

I remember speaking to colleagues who were so passionate about sustainability education they had centered their entire lives on this singular focus. I wondered at their passion when they were frustrated about why people weren’t buying in, especially kids. I was at a loss as to how to help them. The best answer I could come up with was “we have to sell it to them.” Now, almost nine years later, I’m horrified that I thought that way.

**Interviewer**: Yes, I believe this is a perennial problem. We seem to think we can solve problems using the same type of thinking we’ve used in the past; the same thinking
that created the problems. Marketing, public relations, increased technological solutions; will these actually make a difference? How do we create authentic sustainable behavior change that is positive for the environment?

Nicol: This is why I’m ecstatic. I believe I have a potential key to understanding this problem. My heart wasn’t hitched to my head. It isn’t about how we think; it’s about who we are.

Macy (2007) describes three different cultural processes that have been occurring over the last 30 years: Environmental activism; structural changes (i.e. UNESCO’s education for sustainable development, acceptance of holistic medicine in extended health benefits, etc.); and lastly, a shift in consciousness.

For me, personally and professionally, change—especially cultural change—begins with the individual. If it’s to be truly transformational, change cannot be based merely on forming new habits and using effective marketing strategies.

Interviewer: So, you are saying transformational change begins with a shift in consciousness? What does this mean?

Nicol: It means it’s time to face our fears and expand the boundaries of self.

~

NOVEMBER 30—Frustration

I’ve been wracking my brain, writing and rewriting this proposal since late July. I’ve moved from being a recovering scientist, to learning different ways

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2 My journal entries are representative of my subjective phenomenological experiences, including heuristic, intuitive, and hermeneutic dynamics (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Moustakas, 1994; Richardson, 1994).
of knowing, to changing paradigms. I feel frustrated and lost. I feel like I’m never going to get this done.

And herein lies the conflict and a source of joyful irony. I need to investigate my interiority (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009) to determine my own personal worldview, which must be crystallized in a document by next September. I am to accomplish a heuristic, cyclical, adaptive process, about being adaptive and inclusive, and sculpt it into a static document after vehement editing. It’s ironic, that I’m developing a new worldview about freedom from excessive control, but I’m frustrated that I can’t control the process. Argh.

The actual process of writing this thesis becomes part of my research of letting go of control and expanding my boundaries of self.

My life has been plagued by fear, anxiety, and need to control, for decades. My mind scatters incessantly, the downside of being able to jump nimbly from one topic to another on the fly, multitasking. I create little scenarios of “what if?” Because of my need for control, fear, worry, and imagined negative scenarios, I seek more control. It becomes a reinforcing feedback loop. Hanson (2009) speaks of the Wolf of Hate relentlessly excluding parts of and thus shrinking the self. Through attempts to control, I exclude, and begin suppressing my imagination, my feelings and emotions, my sensing of exterior surroundings. I don’t want to be distracted from
distracting myself. Then I don’t have to face my self. Or what my heart is whispering.

When I separate my interiorities (such as feelings) from context, in order to control, I believe I make fewer mistakes. I gain approval from others; this feeds my ego. I am justified in shrinking myself further. It staves off the anxiety for a flicker of time.

It’s as though I’ve painted on a mask that I show the world (and myself). This painted self I see is marvelous, smart, efficient, friendly, and gracious. The irony is that my friends tell me I am this way when I’m NOT in control.

But my heart is whispering in my dreams. Is this fabricated image of self truly who I am? Why can’t I just let go of the fear and become more of who I really am?

~

Interviewer: What do you mean by self?

Nicol: Since Descartes conceptually separated mind from matter (Capra, 1996, 2002, 2007), the separation has become embodied in our actual experience. Many, perhaps most, of us now actually perceive ourselves as separate from much of life, even from aspects of our interior selves. We live in a “delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries” (Macy, 2007, p. 152).

Now, with general systems theory (Macy, 2007; Skyttner, 2001, 2005; Yoshimi, 2001) we’re discovering how deeply we really are connected within the realm of
quantum physics. I’m a bit of a science geek. I enjoy knowing how things work; perhaps I should have been an engineer. I love quantum physics, Schrodinger’s Equation (Efimov, 2012; Gian Paolo, 2008), Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle (Barrow, 2003); one of my undergraduate degrees is in chemistry, which is based on these principles. During my undergrad, I wrote a paper discussing how we really are nothing but energy, and as such, we are connected to everything. But I kept it exclusively at a sub-atomic level, not being aware of the possibility of connections happening at relational, cultural, or communication levels. Of course, de Quincey (1999) argues that our consciousness is not physical, and thus not energy. Regardless of the evidence for or against what we are made of, I think it’s humorous that nearly 20 years later, I’ve cycled back to delve further into this question.

I resonate with Bateson’s (2000) description of our connection. He says our total unit doesn’t stop at our skin, although we think that the part of us that thinks is the only part of us. [She smiles a Big Smile and laughs.] I enjoy these circular statements…

Regardless of what level of understanding we may have of electrons and energy fields, we still all have “a metaphoric construct [of our self], useful for what it allows us to perceive and how it helps us to behave” (Macy, 2007, p. 157). The boundaries we choose to fence our construct of self are powerful (Bateson, 2000; Drengson, 2005; Naess, 1986; Plotkin, 2008; Zacharias, 2000), often constraining our field of attention (Scharmer, 2009) to “our skin, our person, our family, our organization, or our species” (Macy, 2007, p. 154). We can also choose to define self according to our perception of what is correct; for instance objective or subjective reality (Macy, 2007; Scharmer, 2009).
Interviewer: I sense you are preparing something.

Nicol: I agree with Macy; there is currently a shift in consciousness. Even if it’s not yet happening collectively throughout humanity, I know it’s happening with me.

Nicol: [She is seated on her stool in the spotlight. She stands, runs her fingers through her hair; the braid has come undone on its own. She promptly does the braid up again.] That’s what this thesis is all about. I’m changing my worldview, and it’s beginning with my definition of self. How am I connected; what are my boundaries of self; what happens when I intentionally expand them to include the natural world?

I’m going to do this because I need to. I need to help others do it too, for my children, my students. It is morally necessary if it is part of my work as an extension of my authentic self (Scharmer, 2009). The moral necessity is integral to living truthfully, authentically bringing my gifts to the network of life on Earth.

I believe that consciousness transformation is vital for change to occur collectively. If I take this step, then ripples may spread via the network effect (Christakis, 2010a, 2010b). If my own attitudes and awareness change, perhaps that will filter into my language and my actions. As an educator, how I practice, how I speak, how I create educational experiences has an enormous impact on my students and their parents, as well as on other staff and community members.

[She takes a deep breath, pulls off her glasses and rubs her eyes.] This process is exciting, terrifying, and freeing. Plotkin (2003, 2008) describes this as soul encounter. I think that’s an apt description, as I feel I’m heading into veiled mystery. I’ve never had to do research so deeply before—both into literature and into my self.
What is really in the literature and in my self? What are my beliefs about life, about being human on Earth, and about how I’m connected to everything? I am asking myself to relinquish a black and white construct of this and that, me and the world, right and wrong. Welcoming all the hues of light through prisms of my own experience, I’m asking: how will these energetic wavelengths illuminate my life?

~

**NOVEMBER 30—Connections**

We are all connected regardless of whether we acknowledge it or not. This can be terrifying for someone afraid of connection. Trust is enormously vital to build connection—I’ve learned that one through my marriage.

Trust comes through experience. Trust involves both our self and those with whom we are interacting, and no action can come unless we take that first step out of safety. It's terrifying to step out of my cave, feeling like a lion is there waiting! Ah, the inherent assumption the lion is fierce and hungry. Remember Aslan (Lewis, 1955) from the Chronicles of Narnia.

How do I build trust in both my self and my environment, to have the courage to step out? Will I then feel able to take action and help, instead of hiding from what is happening to my home?

I know I'm connected to the natural world. I've always been aware of it, even as a child. It was a joy to muck around with insect molts; campfires and sticks in the water; cliff jumping; skiing; hiking and solo kayak trips as I got
older. I can trust the natural world, but now it’s changing too. Can the natural world trust me, while I change?

Who will I be at the end of this?

~

**Interviewer:** It sounds like an exciting journey.

**Nicol:** [She smiles at the interviewer.] Yes. And this is a key point, the metaphor of journey with no set destination. This is the genesis for me. Goals and checklists have previously been critical control mechanisms in my life. I can continue to honor this (let’s face it, I need something to keep my desk organized!) At another level these skills are necessary for creating action, developing projects, understanding the minutiae of a situation. However, I also can surrender and submerge myself into journey as a way of being.

Aerts et al. (2007) claim that “A world view should contain an organized concept of our real and possible actions in this world” (p. 10). I know my journey is real, but what are the possible actions that will emerge? I’ve marched along for years hearing continual messages about “take action against climate change” or “do this and do that” but I feel completely powerless to do anything that will actually make a difference. Somehow, surrendering into journey releases my anxiety and fear. It allows me to begin the process of developing my new worldview, my new actions.

This is why I’m choosing a lived experience study. In order to develop a new worldview, I need to have and explore experiences. “Every experience leads towards action of the one having the experience. It is by means of these actions that we can
influence the world, and strive for certain ends” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 10). Through these explorations, I embody the experience and become something new.

There is a challenge though. “It has become increasingly difficult to elaborate a life plan, because it is very difficult to take into account the complexity of this whole” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 11). Emerging, holistic complexity is part of my problem. That I see complexity as a problem is also a problem. It implies I’m trying to unravel the complexity instead of “delighting myself in the surprise!” Circles in circles: around I go…it’s a journey, Nicol.

Life itself is complex, an emerging system (Capra, 1996, 2002, 2007; Meadows & Wright, 2008; Scharmer, 2009). I “reclaim [my] intuition, stop casting blame [upon myself], see the system as the source of its own problems, and find the courage and wisdom to restructure it” (Meadows & Wright, 2008, p. 4). Since I’m part of the earth system, when I restructure myself, (Hanson, 2009; Scharmer, 2009, 2011; Siegel, 2010) I change the whole system. As Gandhi said, "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. We need not wait to see what others do" (GandhiServeFoundation, 2009).

I begin by seeking to hitch my head to my heart, accepting responsibility for my own world. “Without any form of integration, responsible action seems to be impossible” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 11). I will integrate my thinking and being with the natural world, in “an effort that is collective, coordinated and conscious” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 11). It is collective in that it involves my whole being, my family, and my relationships in my community. This includes my relationships with the other-than-
human world. It is coordinated because it is planned over several months and three seasons. It is conscious because the basis for my explorations will be mindfulness practice.

My research questions pivot around the influence of mindfulness practices, both in the outdoor other-than-human world, and in my relationships with other humans. With daily mindfulness practice, do my thinking, feeling, sensing, and imagery/intuition become integrated? Do my perception, beliefs and cognitive understanding of the world and my place in it, change? Does mindful presence with the other-than-human world become embedded in my communications and relationships with humans?
Chapter 2: Late Summer

AUGUST 25, 4:15AM

As I was unwrapping the journals I felt a chill. I am beginning this journey. I’m so thankful and filled with gratitude that I do what my heart is calling out for. I can enjoy it, be present in it. No. Not can. NEED. My presence is required. This both excites and terrifies me. The unknown of what is ahead and what I’ll have to confront is daunting.

Bob, my thesis supervisor, suggested I incorporate camping in solitude during my research period. This sounds thrilling until I get to the logistics. But I know it’s necessary. I’m tempted to give it up, but the logical necessity of solitude practice and the force of duty push me forward.

The logistics scare me until I begin to divide and sort them, gradually adding more and more. “Where to camp” is the biggest question, especially given winter in the Kootenays. Mere access into the backcountry requires time,
equipment and knowledge. The sheer volume of snow can be overwhelming.

What about my truck? How will I get the equipment, the firewood to the site?

I'm freezing already, my body temperature and my actions. Can I do this?

12:45PM

I'm at a professional development seminar today with school district staff and teacher education students. I'm watching and participating as we investigate inquiry, trust, vulnerability, connectedness. There are some interesting dynamics at play.

Staff members were thrown into transition state first thing this morning as announcements were made: restructuring administrative positions, reorganizing Special Education methodology, and unknown/undesired mentoring positions. Enormous walls of mistrust and defense emerged from these unknowns—I could hear gasps of shock throughout the room. As the day unfolds, people in the room are trying to engage in the activities of inquiry, but the tension of these announcements is overcoming their focus.

I notice embedded paradigm frames throughout the investigation: dualities, economic growth. I'm trying to engage out of duty. My logic tells me, much of this is very relevant for the classroom. I notice unease in my self. I'm wondering if I'm beyond this or if I belong here.
I recall my Council of All Beings\textsuperscript{3} with moss, a reflective journaling practice I participated in during my first residency at Royal Roads. I remember what moss awakened in me:

\textit{Moss}

\textit{Damp and diverse}

\textit{I am a blanket, coating a coat.}

\textit{I am part of new beginnings and decay.}

\textit{Rebirth, subtle colors, feathering, soft and nourishing,}

\textit{I am a delicate home, quietly working, living, being.}

\textit{I soak up water and dappled light,}

\textit{moving with their flow.}

\textit{Changing, reproducing when it's time—not before.}

\textit{I live on hard places.}

\textit{Don't be afraid to go to hard places.}

\textit{Don't be afraid to start something new. Get established, but}

\textit{roots aren't necessary.}

\textit{Sometimes we break off, but we start again.}

\textit{Different stages do different things.}

\textit{I may look different, act differently; it's all a part of one thing—me.}

\textit{I can dry out.}

\textit{I can be stepped on.}

\textsuperscript{3} “The Council of All Beings is a communal ritual in which participants step aside from their human identity and speak on behalf of another life-form. A simple structure for spontaneous expression, it aims to heighten awareness of our interdependence in the living body of Earth, and to strengthen our commitment to defend it. The ritual serves to help us acknowledge and give voice to the suffering of our world. It also serves, in equal measure, to help us experience the beauty and power of our interconnectedness with all life.” (Macy, 2002, p. 1)
Dug out.

Scraped off.

I need privacy, moisture, shade, and protection of others larger than me.

But I am here to help feed them.

I am calm, quiet, and patient.

I live in and amongst my neighbors peacefully.

I am the start of something that creates space for others.

I live where there is water and purify it for others.

Ever moving, ever expanding;

some places will never need me, or desire me.

It’s okay.

Reflecting on this, I ask a different question: am I needed here in this meeting? I’m aware of the isolation of my work position—union president who works out of my home office. I have little or no connection to the schools or the district staff; the new superintendent doesn’t know me, my practice, who I am.

This leaves me feeling isolated even further, and I imagine I’m not wanted, or needed. Am I okay with this? I don’t know. I feel unsettled, irrelevant. Am I? I don’t know. Is my place going to be somewhere else? Is it truly time to move? And where to? Where do we go? I don’t know, and the not knowing increases my frustration to the point of anger. I am powerless in my ability to make things happen.

I can’t write anymore. Just get through today.
AUGUST 26

Hans and I were talking today about education, our jobs, moving to different cities, past and future choices. We've come to the conclusion that decisions are not made in isolation. You cannot recreate the emotions or the situations. You can try to recreate the logic alone. Even so, the process, the internal workings, and the consequences are all connected. Therefore, decisions cannot be truly made in isolation, and it probably would be beneficial to make them in community with open honest communication.

How do I do this though, when I'm afraid? People will think I'm crazy, ranting about things no one else ever thinks about.

I tell myself—regrets or no regrets—accept the results of my choices, learn and move on. Just do what needs to be done and then go home.

But this feels like giving up on life.

SEPTEMBER 6

I'm outside. Finally. It's beautiful: sunny warm, without the brutality of summer. My dog is annoying the heck out of me because she keeps pestering me to throw her toy. I'm continually interrupting myself to respond to her needs. I can't even stand still long enough to listen. I'm on a tight schedule, and here, it feels like I'm wasting my time on her, although I know I'm not. But this time
is supposed to be about me. Heck, I don’t even have enough time to write down a single idea before she’s back again. How am I supposed to “presence”?

Finally, she goes off to explore a different part of the forest. I sit on a stump and listen.

Sounds—water, bugs, cars, mills, birds (crows), a fly buzzing past my ear. He landed on my hat, why wasn’t I aware of that until he flew away?

Why do I assume he’s a he?

I hear the grass rustling under the dog’s feet as she returns to check on me. Her warm black fur brushes my leg. Birds, twittering. Dog, panting. Bees, buzzing.

I walk to the skunk cabbage grove. The sunlight reflects off a pool, beckoning me with its dazzle. I cross the creek to get a photo. The dog follows me, spots the pool and jumps in. I lose the picture opportunity. Sigh.

I think she’s playing with a fish or something the way she’s jumping around. She leaps out, covered in mud and shakes it off. I’m relieved she’s not next to me. Suddenly, she jumps back in again and runs over to me. I shriek, “NO! NO! NO! NO!” She stops, startled. I listen to the echo of my screams through the forest and off the surrounding mountains.

My heart is pounding. Holy shit, did I just do that? Because of mud?

Mud?
Why is it that I think this dog is going to teach me more?

SEPTEMBER 7

I walk into shade, and the smell changes. No longer the hot and dry of the field, it’s moist, cool, and tangy. I savor the difference of the transition.

The blackberries are ripe. Yesterday, there was a tiny, vibrant green, striped tree frog on one leaf. I longed for my camera. I wish now I could see him again, to preserve his memory, his presence. A blend of wonder and...I don’t know what this feeling is.

I pick a blackberry, popping it into my mouth. A bitter taste emerges on my tongue. Pulling it out again, a little beetle is there, previously feasting on the same berry. I brush him off and eat the berry.

Then I pause and think of something I’ve never thought of before. How would I feel if I were that bug? I wouldn’t take the food from another person; why do I think it’s okay to take it from a bug?

Further down the field, I stop by an apple tree. A million thoughts race through my head. How will I ever write them all down? Am I supposed to write them all down? I think so; this is my data after all. I’ve been trained to record everything. How many years have I taught students to write everything down? But how do I write down FEELINGS?
I walk, constantly analyzing what I hear and smell. Should I stop and write this down? How am I really supposed to do this? Do I need to continually record everything, like chemistry lab observations? But I sense a wanting, needing somehow to just be. Sit. Still. Quiet. I don’t want to use my voice. It seems wrong. An intrusion.

My hand is cramping from writing.

Do I choose a sense and focus on that? How am I going to incorporate this? The endless questions are exhausting me. I’m stopping now.

½ hour later

I stopped for a whole half hour. I’m calm. My heart rate is slower. My facial muscles are more relaxed. I don’t think I’m clenching my teeth. I take deep breaths.

I lay on the moss in a dappled sunlit area overlooking the creek ravine. I instruct my self to slow my thinking down. It’s very challenging to actually do so; I’m not very teachable.

I decide to focus on sound instead. When I close my eyes, the forest sounds keep emerging: squirrels dropping nuts from trees, chirping birds, bugs buzzing by. The dog has been barking incessantly. I get up, compelled to begin the walk back to the house. Then the dog stops. I stop.
I battle with my self to sit back down and resume my listening. Do I go back to the moss? Yes. That decision feels good; my chest releases.

While listening, the part I find surprising is the human sounds that are ever intrusive. They provide a backdrop to the forest sounds. Growling cars and beeping machinery: the sawmill that reminds me of an annoying fly. Is it my imagination, or did I just hear the ping of a text message?

The creek water burbling down the hill seems to be trying to be in tune with the sawmill. They’re in different keys.

My mind won’t shut off. I’m constantly analyzing, collecting information, and recording.

How do I shut this off?

SEPTEMBER 11

I’ve been reading “Nature and the Human Soul” by Plotkin (2008). I am astonished by what he says. Flummoxed, and relieved, I can feel my mind twisting, reaching to grab these new ideas that seem so familiar.

He describes soul as our deep structure, our primary organizing principle. Our soul is our story we are born to live, the largest conversation or relationship we have, our unique place we inhabit in the world. I inhabit my soul. It doesn’t inhabit me. Soul is an ultimate place where I am needed to fulfill
purpose. Soul isn’t our thoughts or our heart; one isolated part of us. Instead, it’s us in the whole.

What does the Bible say on this; heart, soul, mind, body, strength?

Is this what I’m really after? My soul? And where does my heart fit in?

What about neuroscience and embodied cognition? Something in my gut knows it all fits together, just as it talks about in that “Presence” book (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005; Watzke, 2010). I’m getting glimpses of it all over the place, but the image is fuzzy and dim. I feel drained, exhausted.

My eyes drooping, my limbs weak, my body says sleep.

SEPTEMBER 12

I am moved to write, to let it out. Everything I’ve learned and experienced in this 12 days (has it only been 12 days?) is roiling around in me, and I need to express it. Groans, groans, they well up in me, and I am at a loss to express them. What is emerging? This is what I’ve been anticipating? No. Been aware of? Yes. The phrase “pregnant with expectation” came to me, to mind.

I need to read now, to immerse myself in language. But I wonder will I begin to “feel” connections without language?
SEPTEMBER 12, 9AM

How is it that I’m always delving into smaller and smaller pieces of creation, but I haven’t done this with my self? Myself?

The Council of All Beings: time spent sitting quietly with another being and freely writing whatever emerges. Today I sat with a cedar tree with woodpecker holes.

*Our wounds feed others and yet we grow,*
*majestic and strong.*
*Our lives are here to nourish others.*
*Gift.*
*Give and let go.*
*The good and the bad,*
even wounds are sources of gift.
*This is the way we make peace with it.*

~

The Boy and His Breakfast

The four-year-old boy, hair rumpled from sleep, takes a bite of his oatmeal. He quickly spits it out and frantically reaches for his water to cool his burning tongue.

“Mommy, how do cold things get hot and how do hot things get cold?”

Looking up from her oatmeal, the mother sits back in her chair and considers this for a moment. “Well,” she says, “hot things get cold when all the heat moves out of them.” A science teacher by profession, her mind buzzes with atomic movement, quantum energies and how to explain the differences between heat and temperature.
The boy speaks. “Like my hands?”

“Yes, the heat moves out of them and they start to feel cold.”

“Then how do cold things get hot?”

“We have to add heat to them, jam it in.”

He stops and looks puzzled. He repeats himself, “How do cold things get hot?”

She realizes he doesn’t understand “jamming the heat in” and knowing at four years old, he can’t conceptualize atoms colliding, she tries again. “We need to let them touch and then the heat flows into it, and it becomes warm.”

She places her warm hand gently around his cool one. Large smiles of understanding light up his face and that of his sister. Then she smiles.

~

SEPTEMBER 13, 9:40AM

Not jamming but touching.

The words even sound different. Flow versus force.

I walk out of the house towards the forest this morning. The sun is touching the field grasses, warming them. The dew awakes and lifts gently off the grasses like steam, or a blanket lifting off from a cold night before. It touches, caresses, and the heat moves.

10:25AM

I’m in the forest. Before coming up here I clipped barbed wire off the trees at the entrance of the forest that used to border a horse field.
I felt relief and sorrow. There were several nails deep within their flesh that I couldn’t remove. But somehow, it felt better seeing they weren’t lashed together, wounds oozing.

I’m not cold here. I was cold inside the house. Layers of fleece, mittens, wool socks. I even grabbed my puffy down vest from storage to come out here today. I’m too warm now, although my nose feels chilled.

I’m sitting on the forest floor, and just watched a young whitetail buck walk by. I heard him about 10 minutes before I saw him, stepping along, breaking twigs. I knew it wasn’t the bear because of the squirrel; it was chattering and the birds chirped⁴.

The bloody cars and sawmill, ever present in the distance. They’re so intrusive. I don’t notice it at the house. Their presence is blatant up here.

There’s another deer coming; will this one notice me? Perhaps it will notice the scratchy-scratch of my writing.

It’s behind me now. I don’t dare turn my head. The birds are chirping directly overhead, so I’m okay. I can feel him. It’s like I’m out of my body, looking behind me. Quietly he walks past me and further on into the forest.

There are so many things I’ve never noticed before. Just how many spider webs there are; hundreds, everywhere! How squirrel tails twitch with

⁴ At the time of this journal entry, I believed that all animals go quiet in the presence of bears. I have since been informed that squirrels alert each other with more chatter when predators, such as bears, are present.
each squeak, and the lower guttural "uh" after each squeak. Their conversations about anything and everything they notice and discover. They're like the town criers, or the gossipy washerwomen of the town.

The forest floor is soft. My hands rest upon it; the needles of the floor aren't prickly, just soft and comfortable. My facial muscles are relaxed now. I didn't realize they, along with my teeth, were clenched earlier. My body feels looser. Hmm. I smell each breath as it enters me.

What am I sending out as my breath exits?

SEPTEMBER 20, 1:14PM

I didn't bring my camera with me today. I thought, "I won't need it; today I'll draw." I brought my pencil crayons. But now, I'm reluctant to draw, to even bring them out of my bag. I want my camera because I'm scared I won't get the true, complete picture of what is here. Any drawing I do will be only my meager representation, attempted with unskilled eyes and fingers. With all the reading I'm doing on qualitative research, it's constantly drilling into me: data must be complete, rich, and detailed to be authentic. I think then, it has to be accurate, precise, and complete. A copy of what is out here. Shit.

But when I actually think about it, drawings or photographs are only a visual representation. What I see through my lens. So, if I'm trying to draw it, isn't it still what I'm seeing?
But what about what I hear? The frogs, the birds; they’re chattering today.

The dog comes over to me panting, licking my face. Is she going through a journey of development like me? The squirrel chattered and she’s off! Joy, innocence, bounding. Is that why I get annoyed with her, because her joy and energy seem infinite, and mine don’t?

SEPTEMBER 21

As I left the house today, it felt like I was going on an adventure. What will I experience and uncover today? The forest entrance today seemed to be just that—an entrance. A world untouched, unMANipulated, and yet it is. Our impact is evident in the trails, the places where we’ve picked mushrooms, barbed wire and property line flagging tape from previous owners. The devil’s advocate in me says, “But at least it’s not physically constructed.”

The artificiality: is that what bothers me? What do I need? Who am I without construction? Who are we as a society—my children, culture, and schooling (my profession). I am acutely aware of the control, the machining of our self-understanding. Why must everything be constructed and built? What about intuition and flow?

Am I beginning to uncover the core of this?
When I look at a forest what do I see? Green, moss and trees, chlorophyll tumbling about in chloroplasts, assembling into cells. Beams of sunlight rain down, radiant and dappled, exciting electrons and creating growth.

Growth! What do I see?

SEPTEMBER 23

It seems there is this continual seeking, pursuit of the eternally regenerating goal. We are never present in now as we progress, constantly focusing on the future goal. Once attained, we desire something else and again begin to run.

While we’re running, there is no rest, no being present in today, what we’re going through and what it can lead to. I think of the constant scenarios I dwell in, my attempt to predict what will happen, so I’m prepared. I’m always developing “what if?” situations that rarely, if ever emerge. Be proactive, not reactive, I was taught. Instead, the planning and scenarios just create anxiety
and pain within me. I create anxiety and pain within me. I must accept that I'm part of the system that has created this.

What about today and the validity of who we are, today? What about the actual development and stages of life we're going through? How many of us ever think about stages of adult development? I always assumed that we became an adult and we were there. Just get a job, do a job, get married, have kids, and have a little fun until retirement.

Now I wonder about being in journey and the continual process of learning. Comparing this to the stages and skills Plotkin talks about in *Nature and the Human Soul*, I wonder about the other adults who I know—where are they oriented? What skills have they learned on their paths?

Somehow when I view life from this frame, jobs and careers seem puny and insignificant. A smaller frame, where self is the center of it all...

We need hope (Swaisgood, 2011). Where do we, from what do we, derive our hope? Is it from the goal? Does the constant seeking for the eternal goal confirm our internal scenarios? What if we change our ideas of goals? Or rid our selves of a goal entirely?

I hear statements from particular religious people, statements like, "shining God's light on the situation." What does this "God light" look like, feel like; and how does it help us to grow, move past or through things?
“They” say we’re light to other people. Are we brave enough, authentic enough, to do this? What does this authenticity do to us, to others when we bring this forward?

Bringing light—power to bring change, purpose to give hope for the future, partnership to walk through whatever life brings.

It feels like it’s passive. Pat answers of “let God’s light shine” feel passive. Let God do all the work and we just download it, instead of being actively present and taking responsibility for our own development. Passivity in exchange or as a replacement for Peace.

I wonder what role does presencing play in bringing forward our development.

SEPTEMBER 25, 11:03AM

I just had an argument with Hans, and my nerves are jangling. I’ve come outside to escape the house and other people.

The Council of all Beings. The understanding of nature and the beings that we are with allows us to tap into ourselves, to connect.

In order to connect, I need more than just understanding in the thinking sense. It requires the whole system of understanding: imagining, sensing, feeling, thinking, and intuition. This uses all of our being.
I watch the trees reaching and receiving sunlight. They use things unseen to create. They share beneath their roots, again unseen.

We too, share things beyond our words, our thoughts. Research is finding more and more types of connections that we are unconsciously involved in. Do I have the courage to embrace it, or shall I continue to bury my head in the sand?

The branches—standing together tall—trees in the forest. In my first presentation for this program, I brought my idea of networks, the similarity of trees to neurons and the connections there. Wild to think of how I’ve come full circle. We are one and the same with the forest, a walking, talking forest. Does the forest, as a living entity, feel this anxiety? Does it have its own culture?

The parts of life that leave me filled with angst, anxiety, fear, are those dealing with human culture. Relationships, money—that’s a HUGE one. Just the fact I make money so important creates angst.

I need to trust that my needs will be provided. I need to trust about my needs. Need, need, need.

But what about misuse of our personal resources? What about misuse of “needs”? We’re doing that now on a global scale as well as in our personal homes. Because of our personal homes, and our selves.
It's all so connected and I'm trying to tease it apart. Do I choose to follow one strand and disregard the rest? They all deserve to be followed, acknowledged, and honored.

SEPTEMBER 28

It's been almost a month of reading, journaling and spending time outside. I've touched a little on the art side. I logically need to do more, and I'm feeling the desire to do more. I'm also feeling the need for music.

Delving into soul work, combined with presencing/sensing/seeing and embodied cognition, is a complex path, but a necessary one. I feel like I'm calling my learning through my lifetime to be present here and now: the connections between embodied cognition, mind, body, soul, calling, spirit, God, worship, love, wisdom, growth, who we are, place, learning, nature, sin. I'm reminded of Deuteronomy 6:5, using our heart, soul and strength. Does that mean our strength is our mind and body? Is our mind actually our body?

My soul, as the totality of my relationships, is becoming clearer to me. As I confront and sit with my fears the paths unfolding amaze me. I recognize the need for emotional awareness, the need for mindfulness as presencing with suspension and redirection (Rosch, 1999; Scharmer, 2000, 2009; Senge et al., 2005). I need to learn more about presencing; the types of stages and what is included; downloading, seeing, sensing, presencing.
What does it mean to knit it all together—to create a journey, to document it with vividness, authenticity? How do I weave everything together to create this story? Or do I just begin to write?

I just continue to pray for protection, wisdom and grace, for me, for my family.

But, what is prayer, really? And why am I suddenly afraid? Nicol, sit with it, face it. Be present.

**SEPTEMBER 30**

I'm aware I'm feeling more confident of the process of development. I'm not floundering as much. I feel I have answers emerging.

I'm also feeling cocky because of this. Will I ever be rid of this arrogance? It's coming out in my thoughts, my body language. Why is this? It is because I want people to know I know it? I want to be acknowledged and recognized as brilliant. I remember in grade two being called a nerd. A derogatory term, I embodied this; even my initials spell it, N.R.D.S. I hide the desire to let my intelligence fly. I'm ever hiding and becoming invisible, I'm afraid of ridicule.

I don't want the invisibility anymore. It served me well during my youth, but my time has come to unveil it and share—not tell—share, invitingly with others who are ready and open to listening.
SEPTEMBER 30, EVENING

What a day. I've felt physically ill, exhausted; I've been given the gift of epiphany, as well as a nap. I travelled from emotional highs of freedom and joy; luxuriating in the emergence of wildness, then plunged to the explosion of wild anger.

I was joyful, creating a magnificent meal of chicken tortilla pie after a lovely afternoon of naps, tea and books at the picnic table by the creek. My son played in the garden, the dog was well behaved, my daughter created art and story in her journal. We ate. Well, my daughter and I ate.

My son refused to eat.

He then had a bath, and I began to boil over as repeatedly he called for the smallest thing, interrupting me as I tried to clean up after dinner. The last straw was when he came out in his jammies announcing he was hungry. I lost it. Completely. I erupted, lecturing him in the reasons why we have dinner, what it was for, why he needed to eat. I finally reorganized a plate of cold dinner, told him to sit and eat it and went outside to gain control of myself. Once outside, I calmed down. I breathed. The trees shared with me. “We are here, we are steady, to support. Why are you exploding?” they asked me.
I'm exploding because I'm simmering underneath. It's like a geyser or volcano. I erupt when I'm needed too much, when I'm not able to run things smoothly—when there is unpredictability in the pattern.

I thank my loyal soldier for this gift of control—being able to create coldness, rigidity to keep everything cool, calm and logical. I needed this growing up, dwelling in home and family of tumult and chaos.

“Now don't get emotional.” How many times did I hear this during my childhood? Now, at 38 years old, I finally ask myself, why can't I be emotional?

I've never learned to wield my emotions. They are unpredictable in their wildness and I've never unleashed them. I'm afraid of what they'll do; people will respond, “Nicol isn't perfect.” This creates conflict in me; the frame of my mother's statement, “You're as perfect as could be,” wobbles and cracks. I realize now how powerfully damaging, and limiting, perfection truly is. How false and isolating it is.

How many of my fears, my wounds stem from this? The image I've constructed? Now I ask, what do I feel; why do I feel it; how do I express it?

I brought out my guitar tonight. I didn't play songs. I just played with sound. I didn't need any more. It was unstructured play. It felt good: peaceful and creative. I didn't need more structure. But I want more play. The music in me wants to come out. I hear it calling.
I wonder at all these emerging desires. My femininity—is this coming out?

“She realized there was a harsh and mean masculine part of her that had ‘beat down’ her own feminine qualities and another masculine part of her that judged her for this” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 103).

Is this why nature soothes my heart, because I can release my femininity? “This ceremony was led by the feminine…the silent, supportive witness of me…reclaimed her wildness…. She reclaimed her primary membership in nature and her embodiment of the sacred feminine” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 104).

~

Interviewer: Could you please tell us a little about your background?

Nicol: Of course. I’m 38 years old, happily married to Hans. Our son is four and our daughter is six. We live on a ten-acre farmstead we’ve been refurbishing for almost two years. It’s just outside a small village in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia, where we’ve lived for 10 years. It’s an isolated community, with only three roads in, two of which are accessed by ferry, and the other by mountain pass. We originally came here for work, which is unusual. Most people come for the lifestyle.

I’m an only child. My parents were divorced when I was in grade three; I lived with my mother and rarely saw my father until I was in my late teens. My mother remarried when I was in grade seven. My stepfather was an alcoholic and it led to a very tumultuous home experience. We finally left when I was entering grade 11, but continued to associate with him for several years after that.
Just before my daughter was born, my father moved to Nakusp to be nearer to us. It has been a really wonderful time getting to know him again, rebuilding that relationship, in the context of grandparenting.

**Interviewer:** *And your mother?*

**Nicol:** We rarely see her as she lives quite a distance away, perhaps once or twice a year. She and I used to be very close; in fact, I used to emulate her. She also was a teacher, very capable, very independent. I worshiped those skills and abilities.

**Interviewer:** *You were speaking of your femininity emerging, and a harsh, masculine side of yourself.*

**Nicol:** My femininity. For years I beat it down, kept my hair cropped short, was demanding and forceful. Being married to Hans, I’ve certainly softened. Even more so becoming a mother—it’s a powerful thing to have a body that creates a life, nurtures a being into existence. My babies summoned gentleness and femininity out of my soul.

But my true femininity comes from acknowledging and honoring my heart, my soul, and allowing that entirety to emerge, daily. I allow and bring forth nurturing; I welcome it. The masculine part of me is the control, the force, the fight, and the battle. During my adolescent years I lived in a place where I needed them constantly. To let them go and open to the feminine…it’s beautiful.
Chapter 3: Neuroplasticity, Mindfulness, and Presencing

**Interviewer:** Could you explain mindfulness?

**Nicol:** I find people usually grasp this more easily if I come at it from a scientific angle, the neurological side. Neuroplasticity is “creating new neural connections and growing new neurons in response to experience” (Siegel, 2010, p. 5). Within the frame of developing a new worldview and integrating ways of knowing, neuroplasticity is the biological process associated with it. Practicing mindfulness, through meditation or other means, increases neuroplasticity (Bauer-Wu, 2010; Bethany, 2012; Davidson, 2005; Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Ryback, 2006; Siegel, 2010; Turner, 2009) and “shapes neural circuits” (Hanson, 2009, p. 14).

**Interviewer:** So mindfulness means meditation practices?

**Nicol:** Mindfulness is the “skillful use of attention to both your inner and outer worlds” (Hanson, 2009, p. 13). It is “awareness without criticism or judgment” (Chozen Bays, 2011, p. 2). Practices such as meditation are useful to make mindfulness a regular state we can return to whether we’re at work or at the dinner table.

Siegel (2010) describes how mindfulness contributes to the development of neuroplastic integration of resonance circuits. Resonance circuits not only integrate our
own information, but also allow us to see beyond ourselves with mirror neurons that
develop emotional connections, empathy, and behavioral imitation (Doidge, 2007;
Franklin, 2010; Hanson, 2009; Iacoboni, 2009; Keysers, 2009; Rizzolatti & Craighero,
2004; Siegel, 2010; Snyder, Shapiro, & Treleaven, 2012). “This [resonance circuit] is the
pathway that connects us to one another” (Siegel, 2010, p. 62).

**Interviewer:** *Our brains connect us when we use mindfulness practices?*

**Nicol:** I would say mindfulness practices increase our conscious awareness of the
connections that already happen. Mirror neurons and resonance circuitry may be the
means behind structural coupling (Fredrickson, 2013; Maturana, Poercksen, Koeck, &
Koeck, 2004) and embodiment of our experiences (Chemero, 2009; Thompson, 2007;
Thompson & Varela, 2001; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). We and our
environment mutually affect each other and change together in a natural drift through
time. Therefore whatever we interact with, we adapt to, and it to us. We are both the
sum and the emergence of more than our relationships (Bourne, 2010; de Quincey, 1999;
Eisenstein, 2011; Macy, 2007). A characteristic of complex systems is that the whole is
greater than the sum of its parts (Bai & Banack, 2006; Capra, 1996, 2002, 2007; Mason,
2008; Prigogine & Stengers, 1997; Prigogine, Stengers, & Prigogine, 1984). We are
complex systems, as is the environment we are part of. Therefore, our relationships
partially “add up” to who we are, but there is always the Gestalt, the emergence of the
mysterious of the whole. Mindfulness practices not only can increase our awareness of
the “whole”, or the “view from the balcony” (Norman, 2013), but also can create
intention to focus attention and use resonance circuitry in our relationships.
With neuroplasticity, synaptogenesis, and structural coupling, we integrate connections with other matter—living and non-living—into our physical being. Kok and Fredrickson (2010) have demonstrated this with the vagus nerve. There is also increasing evidence in other areas (Feldman, 2007; Hasson, 2010; Kok, Waugh, & Fredrickson, 2013; Rose & Buchel, 2005; Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010; Tettamanti et al., 2012) of the central nervous system, or the brain, self-modifying and adapting to the environment (Minsky, 1987; Siegel, 2010; Varela et al., 1991).

Varela et al (1991) go further, asserting that our brains enact a world with our experiences. Varela, being interviewed by Jaworski (2011), states “Cognition is not a representation of the world ‘out there’ but rather a ‘bringing forth of the world through the process of living itself’” (p. 175), accomplished by “the network of interacting elements [that] gives rise to the emergence of a new entity with completely new properties” (p. 176). These networks are referring to Prigone’s dissipative structures (Prigogine & Stengers, 1997; Prigogine et al., 1984), or chemical systems that “regenerate to higher levels of self-organization in response to environmental demands” (Jaworski, 2011, p. 176) of which our physical being is an example. In the same interview, Varela states,

our language and our nervous system combine to constantly construct our environment…language is like another set of eyes and hands for the nervous systems, through which we coordinate actions with others…this is what I call the enactive view of knowing the world; we lay it down as we walk on its path (p. 177).
While there are still mysteries to be explored around how this occurs, there is increasing research describing this phenomenon. Sheldrake (2006) depicts “morphic fields” to describe the connections of our bodies to the objects of our perceptions. Cognitive Psychology professor Eleanor Rosch (1999) describes the need to re-understand perception and the senses as “participating parts of the mind-world whole” (p. 20). “Mind and world are aspects of the same underlying field…since the subjective and objective aspects of experience arise together as different poles of the same act of cognition, they’re already joined at their inception” (Rosch, 1999, p. 20). She refers to this as primary knowing.

Embodied cognition is the developing field striving to understand this structural coupling, this adaptive self-modification that involves our learning (Chemero, 2009; Hirose, 2002). “This extended coupled brain-body-environment system is what radical embodied cognitive science is all about” (Chemero, 2009, p. 181). Incidentally, this is congruent with the participatory paradigm as “to experience anything is to participate in it, and to participate is both to mold and to encounter” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 278).

This awareness of how connected we are, even if we don’t fully understand it, and the influence of these connections, raises some critical questions. Primarily, I wonder how do we live our daily lives embedded in these connections, in a context of an adapting Earth?

Interviewer: I’m hearing you say that we are actually systems within systems that adapt and change with every experience or encounter we have with anything else. I’m also hearing you say that our connections affect our physical bodies, and perhaps more?
**Nicol:** Yes. The importance of a nature connection goes beyond mere physical and mental health, although as Louv (2005, 2011) has indicated, these are additional benefits. Naess (1986) holds that understanding self as part of nature creates moral responsibility and ethical environmental behavior. “The requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves” (Naess, 1986, p. 29).

And thus we can also see how morality is embedded within this. Embodied cognition and structural coupling are embedded within Deep Ecology. Each of us is not only an individual self, but also an ecological self. “We may be said to be in, and of, Nature from the very beginning of our selves” (Naess, 1986, p. 2). Naess continues that true maturity comes with this understanding of self, that one is in fact not only connected, but part of the whole (Naess, 1986). Dwelling in the whole, we “reduce the dominance of the narrow self (ego) because the wider self is connected to every living being intimately. From this intimacy follows the capacity of identification and as its natural consequences, the practice of nonviolence. No moralizing is necessary” (Naess, 1986, p. 25). This is cohesive with Plotkin (2008), Macy (2006, 2007), and Milton (1991) who assert that being in nature is integral to human development.

**Interviewer:** Are you asserting that we can develop moral code and attitudes through spending time outside?

**Nicol:** Yes, but it is more than just spending time outside. It’s being mindful and embracing the connections that occur while we are outside. When we intentionally do this, we not only develop new moral code, but we can transform entire worldviews.
In worldview development, “we will have to experiment with different models of ‘understanding’ and ‘explanation’” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 14). Altering my worldview to encompass and integrate multiple ways of knowing requires ecological experience. “The way in which we know is most assuredly tied up with both what we know and our relationships with our research participants” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 27), my research participants being the natural world and myself.

**Interviewer:** By having mindful experiences with the natural world, you are developing a new worldview. How then, is presencing involved?

**Nicol:** I like what Hanson has to say about this: “Mindfulness is the doorway to taking in…experiences and making them a part of yourself” (2009, p. 13). Presencing is an intensive level of mindfulness, almost a new type of learning, increasing the depth of awareness of our interactions with the world, and the actions that emerge from these interactions (Senge et al., 2005). Rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, it also acknowledges and integrates cognitive neuroscience and the understanding of emergent qualities of the universe (Bohm & Curd, 1981; Prigogine & Stengers, 1997; Prigogine et al., 1984; Scharmer, 2000, 2009, 2011; Senge et al., 2005).

Presencing is letting go and surrendering, moving into the present moment, barriers removed. It is inversion, the point of passing a threshold “at which everything that isn’t essential must go” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 185) and coming into a higher authentic self. Finally, presencing is “creating a holding space of deep listening” (Scharmer, 2009) to hear and dwell in that authentic self.

The depth of awareness comes from mindfulness practices and involves “the transformation of the human heart” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 26). When we do this, we
begin to act with the “mind of wisdom” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 98) or with what Rosch (1999) describes as primary knowing. This type of knowing is “open rather than determinate, …[wherein] a sense of unconditional value, rather than conditional usefulness, is an inherent part of the act of knowing itself” (Rosch, 1999, p. 10).

Presencing is using mindfulness to connect to a source that is “timeless, direct, spontaneous, open, unconditional value and compassionate” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 99). However we describe this connection—source, natural state, or God (Hanson, 2009; Rosch, 1999; Senge et al., 2005)—“when we’re connected to that source, things become more and more integrated as a path—with intention, body, and mind coming together rather than being all over the place” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 99).

By contrast, I’ve been steeped in analytic thinking in my schooling, upbringing, and my professional life as an educator. I see life as separate events, each “isolating and identifiable” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 98), to the point that my very self is separate and unconnected. I possess a strong predictive ability, by piecing together individual data points of behavior and communications. As a result, I rarely experience “flow” (Brown, 2007; Rosch, 1999; Senge et al., 2005).

Using this analytic thinking in the past, in the face of continual change, I have kept “trying to stop the river, struggling to hold dynamic systems in place, to find fixed patterns in this variable world, and to construct permanent plans for changing conditions” (Hanson, 2009, p. 33).

Interviewer: Gunderson and Holling (2002) speak of the adaptive cycle of change in dynamic systems, and how creative destruction occurs once the rigidity trap gets so severe and constrictive to change.
Nicol: I’ve found that the adaptive cycle is present not only in organizations as Gunderson and Holling (2002) assert, but also within the learning of individual people. The question is whether we enter into it willingly and intentionally, or as though we’ve been tossed into a washing machine. This is where I find Theory U and presencing extremely powerful. Scharmer (2009) speaks of connections to our authentic, higher self that releases us into higher purpose, energy and creativity as the future emerges. His idea is that if we can shift our field of attention, we can develop the connection that moves us past a mere existence type of life.

“Because we are conscious beings capable of reflection, we may be able to learn to monitor the use of our cognitive unconscious, provided that we learn how it operates” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2005, p. 537). Scharmer’s Theory U (2009) provides a framework within which individuals and organizations can use mindfulness to become increasingly aware of connections, and intentionally embody our connections (Scharmer, 2009; Senge et al., 2005; Siegel, 2010).

Theory U is based upon four levels of mindfulness or attention: downloading, seeing, sensing, and presencing. In each level, the field or area that is being paid attention to is different, with a significantly different outcome.

First, downloading is paying attention to I-In-Me. Paying attention to our self in “our self” permits us to perceive only that which “reenacts past patterns” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 239). We are in essence blind to anything but our self, including other relationships.

Seeing is broadening our field of attention to I-In-It. I perceive that I am in a situation and I “notice disconfirming data” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 239) that may not be in
agreement with my own conception of self. This stage is the beginning of Francisco Varela’s opening and suspending process (Scharmer, 2000; Senge et al., 2005) necessary for becoming aware of the full present moment.

Sensing depends on mirror neurons and resonance circuitry (Siegel, 2009, 2010), as the field of attention is I-In-You. Recognizing that relationship is developing, our perception happens from not only our self, but others as well (Scharmer, 2009).

Finally, presencing is I-In-Now, living in the present moment and “letting go and letting come” (Rosch, 1999; Scharmer, 2000, 2009; Senge et al., 2005). This is the field of attention where “perception begins to happen from the creative source” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 239), we are able to work with emerging complexity and innovative ecosystems (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Plotkin, 2008; Scharmer, 2009; Senge et al., 2005).

This last stage, presencing, is what I intentionally work towards in meditation and while I’m outside. Pema Chodron (2012) describes it as a sense of groundlessness and wakefulness, in the experience.

It begins to draw you out of yourself, out of the small, self-centered world that is always just about Me. When you have this kind of genuine connection with yourself and the world, you may begin to encounter wakefulness. You suddenly feel as if you’re in a vast, wide open space with unlimited breathing room…This is the place of just being…you haven’t transcended the ordinary details of your life. Quite the opposite. You’ve finally contacted them 100 percent. (Chodron, 2012, p. 103)

In the development of my new worldview, desiring to adapt dynamically to emerging climate change, I need to dwell in the I-In-Now field of attention. This is
cohesive with Aerts et al. (2007) statement “humanity can only be understood as part of a larger whole” (p. 12). As Deep Ecology’s premise of self is embedded and of the whole (Næss, Drengson, & Devall, 2008), “we begin to see the world as ourselves” (Macy, 2007, p. 27).

~

**NOVEMBER 24**

According to Plotkin (2008) I am a wanderer. I am learning to be a visionary. I recognize so many parts of this within me already. Being able to see across disciplines, but yet I see that I have a long road ahead of me. It’s like wandering in the forest; so many paths to choose and I want to see what is along them all.

I begin to feel frantic—how will I fit them all in? How will I have the time? I begin to slow my self down, like my inner mother taking my hand. She says, “You will have the time you need.” Yes, it is a thesis. The thesis is merely the beginning, the documentation of the beginning process. This is your life. Savor, languish in it. Be present.

Referring to the heroine in Mary Oliver’s poem, *The Journey*, who is determined to save the only life she can save, Plotkin (2008, p. 252) remarks that “This savable life is identified only by striding deeper and deeper into the world until she discovers the place where her life and the life of the world are one”. This is what I’m doing, striding deeper and deeper into the world.
Naess (2008) describes our self growing larger and encompassing the connection to all else. I am stepping out of the door; I am going to meet where, as Buechner states in Plotkin (2008, p. 252), “our deepest gladness and the world’s hunger meet.”
Chapter 4: Autumn

**OCTOBER 9**

My husband shot a buck last night. As we were butchering it, I felt close to the land, closer than I ever had. I felt part of nature, its life force flowing through me. This animal had given its self to me, to my family, to grow, to continue. It's more than dinner. It's part of me. I felt it more acutely than when I pick and eat vegetables from the garden, or the berry thicket. A fellow animal, whose blood is on my hands....

**OCTOBER 19**

I am like an adolescent. I have been accusing Hans of this, because I accuse others of what I am. He and I talked last night of these journeys towards adulthood. He has been aware of his journey, and had an inkling of the genesis of my own, when I began to separate my self from my mother several years ago.
I am so thankful for him. His patience and love; what a gift he is to me.

I'm yearning for another gift, the gift of freedom—from work as a “job”.

I yearn for freedom to just live: create food, clothing and shelter. To daily live and pursue my soul and share it; let that pursuit and sharing be my work.

What is in me to share? Helping, joy, peace and love. I don’t need to control. I don’t want to control. The need for control is something I need to surrender. I don’t want to be the beast, have the answer, the explanation for everything. I don’t want to be the know-it-all. I don’t want to teach as I have in the past. It’s arrogant; it’s harsh, angry, and forceful. I don’t want to force and push. I want to meld and be part of the system, not run it. What system? Any system? No, not any system. The natural system of life.

I want to help, support, provide sounding boards, offer clarity. Provide a foundation to build and create, like moss does. I want to celebrate. I want to point to joy. I want to experiment and try. I want to create and love. I want to cooperate, meld, and be. I want to take the time to savor. Have I ever taken the time to just be without striving?

I don’t want to strive. It makes me frantic inside. It creates the “I must be...” feeling and I have to do it perfectly—look at me! And then I expect love because of my performance.
Is this why I've always really hidden? Be invisible, wearing black. I don't want to strive, to achieve; I want to just enjoy. I want to be open. All of these are subtle traps: striving to not strive, wanting to not want....

To create, savor and share. To work with the natural cycles, the seasons and the natural world. To be part of it, integrate with it, not in charge of it, not forcing it to my own image of what it should be.

Oh, thank you, thank you, my soul.

OCTOBER 26, 2:30AM

I'm in Kimberley for the weekend, at meetings.

Yesterday I drove to Nelson, met a friend for coffee, and got my nose pierced. While they may seem trivial, these events have significance for several reasons. One, I actually reached out to this friend and invited her for coffee. I had met her a couple of times before at conferences, but had never just "hung out". We had a great conversation at Oso Negro. Yes, it centered around teaching and union stuff, but it was good.

Two, we connected in several unpredictable ways. I had unknowingly parked outside her house. They painted their house the same colors we are thinking of painting ours. We both have chemistry degrees, teach high school science, and are involved in unions. She lived in Prince George, where my
husband is from, and married a retired cop, a profession my own husband at one time pursued.

I find this part fascinating, how connections are often so deep and complex, and we’re often unaware of them.

Third, is that I got my nose pierced. It wasn’t painful, and although the jewelry is bigger than I wanted, it’ll be fine once it’s healed and I can change it. It’s a little uncomfortable right now though. But I did it. I went in and did something to my body because I wanted to, that is out of the frame of expectation for my family, my old self. It says, Nicol, you can take risks and let them show. I can feel my self, chortling with glee.

I then drove my truck over the Kootenay pass. Climbing almost 1800 meters, I reached snow at the summit. It felt so good to be surrounded by cold crystalline water.

All I could think about was skiing. Why do I enjoy it so much? Or do I have to understand why I enjoy it? Is it enough that I enjoy it? Can I just sit in the emotion of joy? Do I need to have an origin, a reason? So many questions.

I have a big day ahead with meetings, editing my proposal, meditation, and exercise. I want to go for a run tomorrow. I’m tired; sleep now.
OCTOBER 29, 1:30PM

It’s been a tough day working through personnel issues and conflicts. People sometimes really bully each other. So, how do I deal with it? I need to remain authentic; tell it like it is. Conflict management requires us to have courage to say the things that need to be said, to uncover the areas of differences, and open up dialogue to explore these differences. Often the situations have people coming at a similar situation from different angles. It seems my job is to bring awareness of those differing perspectives.

People at all levels need to respect each other and learn to communicate.

During this conference in Kimberley I was exposed to a distinct contrast in communication. I was speaking with three members of my executive, who work at two different schools. Conversing with Joe and Pauline, I could see we were definitely on the same page in understanding a politically charged issue. We see cooperation and conversation as key to solving problems.

James, on the other hand, feels powerless and lashes out emotionally. His need for power-over dominates his language. He doesn't see how his words communicate this value. I may be generalizing, that when people refuse to acknowledge their connections, their language is grasping, frantic, disjointed...out of control.

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5 All names except for Hans, Bob, Merrell, and myself have been changed to respect the privacy of the individuals.
How does mindfulness affect our language and how we relate to each other, displaying the intent behind our words? In my awareness of my emotional yo-yoing, I am also increasingly aware of my desire to not harm people with my words.

This is something I need to keep critical awareness of today. I'm supposed to have a very difficult conversation this afternoon and then help facilitate a challenging meeting. I feel prepared now, but I wonder when I'm present in the emotion, will my language change? Right now, I can sink into the discomfort of uncertainty, anger, frustration and accept it. Be in it, yet look at it from a set of exterior angles.

How do I communicate something that will make both of us uncomfortable, perhaps even combative, and yet turn it to build something positive? Again, one of those questions that gets me so exhausted in the unknowing that I shut off.

There are too many questions. Too much noise.

NOVEMBER 1

I've just spent the day driving down to Richmond from Nakusp. As I got closer, and passed exit 73, I began to panic, thinking I had missed my exit. My anxiety level skyrocketed and I realized I felt trapped. I didn't know any other
way to get to Richmond. Then I approached exit 66 and saw the correct locations, I was relieved.

I continued to ponder this during the rest of the 45-minute drive. Cities are unusual environments. There is so much visual stimulation that it’s almost dizzying, especially in a vehicle. Everyone seems to be rushing within a rigidity trap. Road and traffic are organized to control, force, guide traffic, and thus people, in one direction.

When I think of the occasional times a wild animal ventures onto a highway—what chaos does this bring to the system? People are frantic to continue in their controlled busyness and express anger at the interruption. The being who doesn’t live according to artificial construct—built environments—becomes dizzy and confused. The animal attempts to function out of their reality of “do what seems right”. The other being usually ends up dead because they didn’t “do what you’re supposed to do”.

We sweep up their body, and carry on to our destination. Where is our compassion? We’re too engaged in our busyness to notice.

Are we so disengaged because there is so much visual stimulation; is this why we’ve resorted to downloading as opposed to seeing, sensing, reflecting and presencing?

There’s just too much, too fast.
NOVEMBER 2, 2AM

I'm in the hotel and I woke up an hour ago, feeling panic and angst about people I know in Nakusp who don't want to be friends with me or are deliberately cool towards me in their attitude. What did I do, that they don't want to be my friend? What is it about me they don't like? Have I done something? I feel like they know something about me that is evil and they are going to foul everyone's mind against me, and I will be alone, broken and abandoned.

I'm sorry God. For everything I've done to hurt people. I don't want to be ostracized.

Then, I remember the moss. Not everyone needs me. I am not needed in some people's lives. I have to let them go. I no longer need to hide, fearing my stepfather's alcoholic rages and my mother's attempts at controlling chaos. I am no longer there. That loyal soldier behavior and thought pattern is no longer needed. I can let go of this thinking.

NOVEMBER 2, 9:20AM

I woke up combative this morning. I don't know why. I didn't feel this way in Kimberley. On the phone, I asked Hans if it was just the city.

But I read something in the Four Windows book (Gallegos, 1991) about our feelings. They are not merely emotions, but a response to energies. Our
feelings encompass our emotions, but we also respond to other's energies. It's like a form of adaptation, or structural coupling.

This makes sense in response to my reaction this morning. Typically, these meetings are negative and whenever I'm around people I pick up and "feel" like they do.

5:40PM

I'm wondering about the Four Windows of knowing: thinking, feeling, sensing, imaging, all fueled by intuition. Thinking is our cognition; feelings are emotions and energies. Sensing is our sensory organ perceptions; imagery is our imagination in the past, present, and future.

Is the feeling part the heart? This feeling part intrigues me. I can solidly feel what others feel when it's an intense emotion like sorrow. Can I learn to perceive more subtle feelings? How does it work? The experience of it is so wrenching. How do I become so mindful of it that I can "go with the flow"?

NOVEMBER 3, 6:25PM

I have to stop thinking about how do I make myself feel and/or imagine. I just need to feel: let myself go into feeling, into imagining.
This scares me because of the unknown. What will it be like? What does feeling feel like? How will it make me behave? What will it make me say? My mind is asking me this and I don’t have any answers.

I just closed my eyes and told myself to go into the feeling I have about being ostracized and ignored at these work meetings. I felt like I was sinking down and the tears erupted from my eyes. Despair, abandonment, agony. My heart and chest cavity felt physical pain. I wanted to retreat and felt myself coming back. I had to tell myself to go back into it—feel it. I did and more tightness, more tears.

Then I had awareness of my inner self; the tears stopped. How I long to be free of other people. I’m fearful of them. They are going to hurt my family and me. They are conspiring against me. They will hurt me.

I feel like this is elementary school.
I'm off to Vernon today with a friend—doing jobs and getting an oil change in the truck. I've been up since four o'clock and I've spent the last hour checking Facebook, doing yoga and now I'm having my coffee.

I've spent the last number of days reading about participatory paradigm and personal narrative. I'm realizing the experiences I've had or denied myself have truly been vital in my life. I need experiences. I need to live them. I need to not just think but sense them, feel them, image them, intuit them. Be mindful during, before and after them.

I am conscious that I desire, outdoor adventure. I want the wild, the authenticity. I don’t want merely an image. I want the bust-out-of-me LIFE that comes with authentic experience. I want the joy, the depth, the vibrancy, and the vividness. The vibrancy of color and shadow; the vividness of percussion and primary violin.

Music, oh music, the experience of creating and living it. I’m tired, oh so exhausted of sitting and watching the experience, like some sort of armchair voyageur.

I’ve noticed when I intend to experience my day and everything in it with all the vibrancy of experience, I feel joy, my muscles ease, tension releases, and
I sense peacefulness. I cultivate an ability to just be in the moment. Tension and anxiety evaporate.

What replaces it? I feel love—more love for my children who are coloring and playing with a cardboard box at the moment. I have more patience. What happens to my words? They are different, I'm not sure how yet.

Conclusion: I need to experience.

NOVEMBER 24, 11AM

As I was reading Plotkin (2008) last night about the wandering stage—searching for my soul, my ultimate place—I wonder about “ultimate place.” It kind of denotes an exclusive “right spot”, "correct". Rather, I wonder if I'm searching for clarity about how I perceive the world and embracing all the ways of knowing. Perhaps my relationships, my soul, will become clearer if I use all the ways of knowing.

As I go outside for two or three hours tomorrow, I'm going to focus on sensory and feeling, seeking these experiences and recording my perception of that experience. Sensing and feeling. I'm gaining a clearer picture of my own feeling, the energy I give off. The choice I make about dealing with my Loyal Soldier of being driven by fear and acceptance. I don't have to be afraid.

I am not at war with other people. I can open myself and live in love. God, my source, is in me and I have access through my soul. I can choose to
change how I feel and think. How do I wield my energy? What happens to my energy when I'm outside in nature? The mindfulness training is critical and I need to learn more.

It's interesting how I'm changing in my thinking. I'm listening to the church sermon, "we are sinful, sinful flesh, etc.", "we must yield, die daily."

What about our hearts as inherently good? I see my heart as opening myself to God through my soul, to love. Sinking down into the darkness to deal with the sin, and then surrendering it, I'm free.

At the root the messages are the same thing, but the way it's presented in the sermon is one of force, anger, war. I'm not interested in living that way. I'm not interested in living in death, control, and force. I desire freedom, love, openness, desire, vibrancy, and joy. I'm thankful for understanding embodiment, soul journey. Not that I want to become elitist. I don't. I want to be free. And then free to love, be gracious, full of gratitude, a reflection of His creation.

Die to our selves, live for our Spirit—oneness with all. Links to beautiful acts, not moral acts, because whatever we do, we do it to ourselves. Connect with the other living things, the rest of the planet and to God.
NOVEMBER 26, 9:30AM

We had our second major frost last night and the world outside the forest is bedecked with white crystals. Everything is shaded with white; all color is muted. Yet in the forest, the ferns and moss still thrive, cradled by the trees themselves. The tree trunk I’m perched on is covered with moss. Cold to my fingers and seat, yet still slightly feathery, they are just stiffened with cold. Mindfulness. My practice this week out of the taming elephants book (Chozen Bays, 2011) is to catch and remove filler words. My desire today: perhaps this week is smell? Sound? Touch?

Just be, just be. There is no hypothesis to prove or disprove. Just be, just be and see what happens.

Just be,
And see.
A whiff of snow,
Will it come today?
Maybe.
Or.
Maybe not.
Just be,
And see.
That is the joy. Not knowing
and
Not having to know.
Just be.
I’m by the seasonal creek and the sun was peeking over the hill. I stopped to sit and enjoy the light. While I’m here, I meditate for a few minutes and begin to notice burbling sounds coming from opposite directions. I ask myself, why only these directions? Why not directly in front of me? I investigate going up and down the creek. It’s flattish, the bottom of a gully, with plentiful debris. The water meanders through and under it. The water only speaks when it is encountering something that alters its path. When do we speak? When do I speak? Is it because my path is altered? The water carries on, as do I. Is my voice a burble, a pleasant melodic unpredictable tune, soothing?

I was struck earlier as I wandered a path—I’m following someone else. Some one? Who? Why must we always think of some one as a person? Why not a deer, a dog, a bear. They are one? What does it mean to be one? Because I trod the same path am I one with them?

**NOVEMBER 27, 10:20AM**

I’ve just come in from a six-kilometer run and two-kilometer walk on the trail to the golf course. It was crisp outside and my body felt fit and strong. I had difficulty focusing in on my breathing so just enjoyed my body movements. As I reached the trail leading back to Glenbank Road, I looked up. Saddleback Mountain was glorious. Breathtaking. And I had almost completely missed it
focusing on where my feet were, where would I place my next step-one after
the other to complete the next kilometer, reminded of my time and pace by my
GPS tracker.

I stopped running. I turned off my phone. I chose to walk the final two
kilometers home. During that walk I was struck, no, bidden, by the thought, “I
am part of this.” I tried to extend, to extrapolate, and then, no. I am part of
this. That’s enough. I don’t need to go further. I am part of this.

I was also keenly aware of how violent and angry my language often is.
Why. Where is this anger and violence coming from? Do I need to know? Is it
enough to accept that anger, sink into it, and then surrender it? Mindfulness.

12:30PM

I spent the rest of the morning in the forest with Hans, my son and the
dog, bucking up fallen trees and picking up brush. I was exhausted, physically
weary after an hour. My skin was alive and tingling with cold, my fingers hurt
from the prickly branches. I was worn. How unused my body is to being and
working outside.
Interviewer: *Worldview construction; isn’t this something that just happens as we grow up? Can it actually be intentionally formed?*

Nicol: These are interesting questions. I would say yes, to both. For me, I grew into a worldview, and now I’m challenging it, reforming it. My analytic, control-based thinking becomes a useful skill, allowing me to observe areas that are not aligned with what I profess. Of course, there is the danger that everything becomes so compartmentalized and enveloped by fear that a paralysis develops. Even the thought of questioning, let alone remolding the basic frames of how I view my place in the world, can become insurmountable, if I allow it to. This may be another arena where sensing, feeling, and imagery/intuition are helpful—to move past the fear.

This may be one of the beautiful things about being human—creating our selves.

Worldview construction is something that must be done in the whole. Aerts et al. (2007) describes it as relating “the different domains of experience, so that they are liberated from their isolation and become parts of the whole” (p. 10). Further, “if extensive elements remain unconscious, there is a danger that one aspect will emerge as the view of the whole” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 10). This is an additional reason that I’ve chosen to write this thesis in this way. I’m crafting to “make the communication between
the different layers of our experience explicit” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 10) to avoid this trap.

**Interviewer:** *It almost sounds like we need mindfulness and primary thinking to develop worldviews. Mindfulness allows primary knowing to develop; then primary knowing—accessing the whole—allows worldviews to develop.*

**Nicol:** Need is a very powerful word. For me, mindfulness has been imperative. As worldviews are frames of reference within which our experiences are embedded and make sense to us (Aerts et al., 2007), I need to be aware of these frames that allow us to view the world through the lessons of past experience, and connect to new experiences. “The material used to construct a worldview comes from our inner experience and our practical dealings with things, as well as from the interpretation of history and of scientific knowledge about our world” (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 9).

My personal worldview—while continuing to honor my scientific “objective” stance—is shifting towards the postmodern/participatory model (Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln et al., 2011). I recognize the need for an integrated understanding of life, a rich, complex, and messy adoration of lived experience, and emergence of unknown (Bochner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997). “Ambiguity, chance, accidents – these are the terms that life echoes” (Bochner, 1997, p. 5).

Merely by acknowledging the above needs, I have already begun the process of molding and sculpting a new worldview. Within my own heuristic process, which includes the creation of this thesis, the seven modules that Aerts et al. (2007) recommend resonate and ring true.
(1) What is the nature of our world? How is it structured and how does it function? (2) Why is our world the way it is, and not different? Why are we the way we are, and not different? What kind of global explanatory principles can we put forward? (3) Why do we feel the way we feel in this world, and how do we assess global reality, and the role of our species in it? (4) How are we to act and to create in this world? How, in what different ways, can we influence the world and transform it? What are the general principles by which we should organize our actions? (5) What future is open to us and our species in this world? By what criteria are we to select these possible futures? (6) How are we to construct our image of this world in such a way that we can come up with answers to (1), (2), and (3)? (7) What are some of the partial answers that we can propose to these questions? (Aerts et al., 2007, p. 13)

In the context of developing a worldview, these questions dramatically change how I perceive nature: living and non-living, human and non-human. They open a pathway to strengthening my use of intention (Hanson, 2009; Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, & Davidson, 2008; Siegel, 2010). It begins with mindfulness and neuroplasticity.
DECEMBER 1, 1:30AM

The power is out. It has been since 8PM. It’s raining, and I’m writing this by candlelight.

I woke to help my son use the bathroom earlier, and couldn’t fall back asleep. I got up to check my email, and I can’t access the Internet on my phone. I actually feel disconnected. It is the most bizarre feeling. It is as though I have lost my lifeline. How will I find out when the power is scheduled to come back on? How will I read the news? Perhaps there was an earthquake on the coast?

After mulling over several scenarios, I catch myself doing so. Come back. It’s okay to not know what’s going on in the outside world. Just be.

Then I begin to think about, well, what am I connected to then? What is here and now? My family, snoring around me. My animals. I hear the dog
checking on the kids upstairs. And of course my home, my self, the Earth.

What about these connections?

Technology—my phone and my computer—they of course are made of things of the Earth but somehow, their abstractness is artificial. Is it that I can’t conceive of how these objects are made, or making them with my own hands? Or is it the information that impales my eyes…the energy that I sense….

Perhaps that’s it. The candles here are real. I can touch them, and feel them. I can sense their energy. Beeswax and flames; their shadows dance across the page as I write. Each one casts its own shadow. The woodstove filled with firewood we cut into rounds, split, stacked, keeps us warm. The sausage we made from the deer in the field. I felt connected to them while we watched the deer dance in the summer, then in the autumn butchered them, lifting steamy, bloody loins into bags to freeze. Now they are part of me, nourishing my body, and those of my family.

The rain continues to fall outside. It’s warm. December 1st and I often don’t need to zip up my coat or vest. I miss the snow. This moisture is different and I feel disjointed, unprepared, like I’m forgetting something with no snow.
Will it come? Will the Earth freeze, creating ice puddles? I jump and glory in the crush of crystal shards, glistening fields of delicate icy lace and that fierce breathlessness as it attempts to reach my nasal passages.

Cold and frozen, my body defies it, heart-pumping red hot, warming my world and me. Is that what our ego does to the Earth? Warm it for our comfort? “We try to hold onto fleeting pleasures and avoid discomfort in a world where everything is always changing” (Chodron, 2012, p. 54). What of the comfort of discomfort? The aliveness that Saunders (2012) speaks of, the addiction to danger and adventure that wakens us from our comfort slumber and numbness.

The beauty of simplicity. I actually hope the power stays off. I would love to have the whole weekend this way. What if I could live my whole life this way? To just live; eat, breathe, clothe and shelter my family. Is it really just my yearning for an escape from the social expectations of this culture? Or is it also a call from my heart to pay attention to what is really vital. Discard the trapping and get to the essence of what this life is all about.

My groan is for freedom from this shell of a life.
DECEMBER 2, 11:05AM

I’ve noticed something interesting today. I’m trying to have a meditation time first thing in the morning, just focusing my attention on my breath. I’m also occasionally praying during this time.

But the interesting thing is that later, during breakfast, playing Lego with the kids, and now at church, I find I’m beginning to be able to focus my attention a little bit. And when I do, my fear, my anxieties are not so powerful. I’m aware of my connections to other people, to what is happening around me. Fuzziness and sleepiness disappears. I feel like I stand taller and I am more present in the physical sense. I’m feeling urged on—perhaps I’m learning, growing, achieving some beginnings of success?

But my presence is not here in arrogance, rather with compassion and love, as a part of the others. I feel some part of me saying “look at me”, and then it gets dissolved as something better, more peaceful comes in.

DECEMBER 6, 9:28AM

I had an epiphany this morning while meditating. When I try to control, I am only living in the future. I am unable to either influence the present or enjoy it! I am blind to my relationships; my field of attention is limited to my self and occasionally my situation. I try to force my perspective, driven by a combination of greed and aversion to keep life static and unchanging.
When I live in the present moment, I am able to see the emerging future through my relationships. My field of attention expands to include self, situation and others from varieties of perspectives. I am able to influence the future with love, compassion and authenticity. I have joy.

Then I found this:

“When [life] is filled by that which satisfies a hunger that is both physical and spiritual in a mutuality that sustains both without violation of either, only then can life be truly fulfilling” (Zacharias, 2000, p. 84).

Mutuality that sustains both the physical and spiritual. As the Zen saying goes, “Nothing Left Out” (Hanson, 2009, p. 131). When I try to control out of fear, I am excluding and getting smaller. I am not sustaining. I am reducing, breaking apart; creating unsustainability within myself.

Today, I choose a journey going in a different direction—towards unity and inclusion.

**DECEMBER 7, 6:54AM**

I think I need to approach this thesis from multiple perspectives. I’ll do the interview portion as a teacher’s perspective approaching the end of UNESCO’s decade of sustainability and the changing profession. And I’ll do the personal journals from a mother’s and woman’s personal perspective—joy of life, embracing surprises. What skill, worldview encompasses the whole complexity
of who I am? I began this journey as an analysis and it’s becoming a journey of wholeness....

9AM

It’s finally snowing, truly snowing. Crisp, little flakes, accumulating in abundance, cover the world in a white cloak. I feel relief, like I’ve been holding my breath in expectation without knowing it. Relief. Normalcy. Even more than the coming Christmas season, the arrival of snow brings me joy like some experience the joy of Christ’s birth.

This relief I feel. Why do I need snow so badly? Is it because I desire something to be regular, predictable? Why do I force this expectation upon the Earth? Or is it to celebrate the change, the creation of a new season?

DECEMBER 8, 8AM

Pushing. Shoving. “Daughter, don’t force the stool past the cabinet. Stop and move it a different way. Otherwise it damages both the stool and cabinet.”

Force: pushing and shoving. Each one pushes against each other. They damage—regardless.

In the mornings when the kids are playing, in the absence of other interactions, I’m aware of vibrations of sound. They move across the room and encounter me. Quiet sounds physically feel gentle, caressing my skin. I feel it
on my skin, less so my ears. Loud, aggressive sounds feel exactly that. My skin
vibrates with their energy. Laughter tickles. Anger feels like a shove. My body
takes it in and my muscles tense, blood pressure rising. If it continues, I begin
to lose awareness. Another challenge, to recognize this and retain awareness.

Very curious.

DECEMBER 8, 2PM

The house is quiet. One child is painting upstairs, another is in the bath, Hans is refereeing hockey at the rink. I am quiet, still. Inside of me is an
unearthly quiet and yet a tension that I needed to express.

We put up the Christmas tree today. Hans asked me this morning if I
could use the artificial one. No. I cannot use something artificial to celebrate
life. Our daughter chose a tree from the front field. We counted its rings—6
years—as old as she is. She laughed with joy, welcomed the tree into our home
as her sibling. We honored the tree with our beautiful ornaments. The kids
naturally gravitated to the ones with personality and worked diligently to make
the tree part of us, part of our family.

I'm reading World as Lover; World as Self (Macy, 2007). There is so
much that resonates within me. Her depiction of issues around time, around
boundaries of self; her descriptions of visiting Khampagar; I felt it, the fullness
of majestic being as they travelled together, through the mountains.
Pain and yearning.
Traps of time, anger,
The agony of screaming souls...
I shake, externally exhausted,
Enforcing a box to hold my self.
My silent screams burst.
Tears
At last.
Surrender and let go of my self.

DECEMBER 9, 6PM

I've just had a day with what feels like endless discipline and correction for the kids. Squabbling, arguing, negotiating and I've resorted to yelling to make myself heard. I'm vibrating with anger. Endless anger.

Waiting for my family to finish their dinner I sat to read Buddha's Brain (Hanson, 2009). Talking about the wolf of love and wolf of hate, it talks about the wolf of hate shrinking our circle smaller and smaller until it only contains our self and then sometimes even only part of our self.

Oh my God.

Zen saying, "Leave Nothing Out" (Hanson, 2009, p. 131).

I am shocked at myself. Shocked at what I've been doing to myself, my family. I've been feeding the wolf of hate, getting smaller and smaller, filled not with love, but hate, greed, discontent, smallness. I am filled with remorse.
and grief. This feels like an enormous cavern that I’ve only discovered the entrance to; I need to clean out, air out, open and let the sunshine in. Leave Nothing Out.


Which wolf do I feed?

Leave Nothing Out.

DECEMBER 10, 7AM

I had a chat with Jane last night. It was really good to visit with her. She is such a good friend; so marvelous to hear about her joy re-entering her life. I was aware of it even without words. Interesting too, the mirror of challenges we’re having in our respective organizations.

I’m thankful for this thesis journey. It is giving me the skills I need, not only for family and friend relationships, but also for navigating change in an organizational environment.

Communication and experience; they go hand in hand. I choose my words, my energy, my feelings—all my ways of knowing—on the basis of what experience I want to create for others as well as my perception of what my experience is. My language, my communication must be both a creation and a
response. I want it to be both. The compassion, the desire I have to create a loving experience through my language is new.

So what do I focus on? Perhaps I need a focus on portraying my experience. As soon as I focus on one, I’m excluding the other. How do I live this “Leave Nothing Out” within this context? Is it something I need to seek a formula for? Is it something that comes unconsciously? Where does this love come from? God? Through my heart? Shit, I’m back to the 20 million questions.

DECEMBER 12, 8:40PM

I had an interesting experience today. I was at the local high school speaking to some teachers about the possibility of a new educational program for next year. Afterwards I was speaking with one of them about his concerns. He said he was trying to be objective. I was amazed at how far I’ve come because I immediately said his subjectivity is also necessary because that allows his gifts to come out. “That’s what we need. We need everyone’s individual contributions and viewpoints.” He was receptive and open to the idea, but I could tell he was a bit stunned by my proposal. How do I go about teaching others and welcoming them to use both objectivity with perspective and subjectivity? The view from the balcony and the dance floor....
And then there is Hans. Some days he’s so mercurial. We’ll be joking around one minute and then in an instant he flies off the handle at me, accusing me of belittling him, being patronizing, overloading him, not being appreciative, accusing him of constantly being the bad guy. It feels like it’s me doing something wrong all the time. And he rarely apologizes to me.

How the hell am I supposed to communicate with him? There must be a pattern. What am I doing? What is he doing? I need to pay more attention to his behaviors, words, body language as well as my own. Bring mindfulness to my language.

Another thing I’ve noticed. Deep Sleep. I am sleeping incredibly soundly.

DECEMBER 15, 6:30AM

Yesterday in Newbury, CT a gunman murdered two teachers, a principal, and an entire grade 1 class.

I’ve heard of these shootings before, but never has it actually impacted me so strongly. Some might say it’s because I have a four and six year old. Some might say it’s because I’m aware of what elementary school is like. Some might say it’s because we have guns in the house. I think these are all factors to be taken into account but I’m also profoundly aware of the process of integration.
I sit here in front of the Christmas tree, and dwell upon the possible experience of another mother. One who normally awakens and spends her morning caring for her children, today awakening to a new reality of a quiet, still household, never to awaken to their voices and laughter again. I ache. I want to sit and feel for them. I send prayers. Not to something abstract in the sky, but to those parents, to that lone remaining brother of the gunman’s family, to share my strength, give peace and love to help them through this moment. I’ve never experienced this genuine desire to help before. I like it. I like knowing that I’m connected, I’m helping, I’m here.

Hans and I also had an interesting chat last night about parenting in light of this tragedy. How do we as parents structure our lives to limit the violence, encourage the connections and creativity? As we consider moving to a larger center for work possibilities, my understanding of self and connections and communication is more vital. I feel the urgency of this need.

**DECEMBER 19, 7:45PM**

Well, my proposal is almost done. I have to redo my “ways of knowing” section and find a couple of different quotes but I’m getting there. I also have to revisit the phenomenology thing. Now I’m certain that I need to really get into mindfulness practice and journaling to reach that deep rich description.
Expand, expand. Find the lyrics of the songs in my mind. Find the melody of my soul. The haphazard strands of hair escaping my braid, they seem to intertwine with scrawling text across the page. My letters, thoughts, sentences half formed and messy. I was distracted today, a jumble of thoughts as I drove. Not safe, unpredictable.

Sleep now, my body needs it.

1:30AM

There are so many times when I feel a gray fog come over my brain. It’s like I turn off something inside; change a channel? I keep doing whatever task, for instance, editing a paper or sometimes when I’m driving, but I’m not completely there. These are dangerous situations, really. Not only because I’ll probably get in a car crash, but mostly because I’m not present. When I’m writing, editing, out in nature, in conversation with a friend, working, I don’t need a gray fog. Why is it there?

I think it comes when I don’t want to see something. I’m hiding from it. Shrouded in fog, I’m fooling myself because I’m still there. It’s pretending, which I no longer want. I don’t want to pretend anymore.

Hans and I were talking about being authentic as we plan on having coffee with a couple soon. It’s a delicate situation trying to explain something to someone who may or may not be ready to hear it. But we still have a
responsibility to be truthful and real to our experience, our needs. How to share without crushing another?

Be authentic with no gray fog or hiding. Peel open the cloak and blossom in my journey. Sigh. Experience and communication.

DECEMBER 21, 5:30AM

I've been awake since 3AM. I've been trying to meditate. Focusing on my breath, doing body scans. Nothing works.

My mind is roaring, leaping from thing to situation to person. Weaving, integrating, jumping over, under and through. Everything is spinning and moving and yet totally still.

I keep coming back to the conversation I had last summer about how thoughts connect us all when we really begin to use our hearts, minds, and intention. We truly become more connected and we're able to invite others to be closer to us, without them being aware of it. Even without saying a word, we can communicate a desire to connect. It seems like a type of power, but one so deep that I am in awe of being allowed to wield it. Or am I wielding it? Or am I just joining it?

I am so tired right now. I used to be able to sleep when I was a child: then not at all as I entered adulthood. Now it seems, I truly sleep, sinking to
unfathomable depths awaking refreshed, except when I get like this. What is happening to my interiority? It has become frantic, frazzled, frenetic, zooming.

**DECEMBER 23, 2PM**


I haven’t meditated properly at the beginning of my day for three days now. Nor have I gotten outside. I am incensed, the ignition of my emotion sparking, snapping at everyone. The slightest disobedience of my children sends me off the edge. I keep reminding myself, “focus on my breathing etc., etc.” but there’s no control. I’ve gone from one extreme to the other. Even certain music with wrong vibration; too excitable, jarring sets my interior jangling.

With other adults I’m extremely sarcastic; rolling my eyes, making depreciating jokes, sly grins. The anger roils within me. And I am weary. Fueling myself with coffee, coffee, coffee. Hans says we can buy a coffee farm in Hawaii. Maybe we should, but I would drink all the profits.

During the church sermon today, I was again struck by the war metaphor. I find myself pulled in two directions: my formal religious beliefs say we’re in a spiritual battle. This jibes with what I see in human culture. Buddhism says we are pulled by eight worldly concerns of “pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and disgrace, praise and blame” (Chodron, 2012, p. 54). This also jibes with what I see within myself. The natural world says cooperation and I feel
peaceful. It also can be competitive and bloody though—how often is this me placing a story on what I understand?

Biology says sympathetic nervous system and the peripheral nervous system. I am daily becoming more aware of the activation of each of these systems. All these ideas are agitating and I see value and patterns in all of them. Do I really have to choose, or can I integrate all of them? Yes. I need to integrate: weave and blend and paint. And, perhaps, allow some to remain in tension with each other. This too is beautiful.

Bob says use all my ways of knowing in my writing, my speaking, my creating. I’m trying to. I notice that I’m noticing other facial expressions more. I’m slightly aware of written passages that don’t sit well. What’s interesting is that I have difficulty sitting with this topic as I write about it.

It’s a good thing it’s a holiday and I’m not feeling pressured to work. Pain and frustration. I don’t know where any of our life is going and its DRIVING ME INSANE!

Jean-Marc Boivan said, “Live your life like a lamb or live your life like a lion” (Obenhaus, 2007). I feel like I’ve been a lamb for 38 years. Now it’s time to let the lion out. The irony is that the lion may be more like the lamb, just as the lamb was more like the lion. And yet, remember Aslan...how much can we really learn from reading stories to our children?
Chapter 7: Methodology

Interviewer: Could you explain what exactly you’ve been doing?

Nicol: I’ve used an integrated methodology drawn from a postmodern participatory approach (Ellis, 2000; Lincoln et al., 2011; Richardson, 1994), that incorporates phenomenological (Van Manen, 1990), intuitive (Anderson, 2000), and heuristic (Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Moustakas & Douglass, 1985; Richardson, 1994) inquiry. I’ve grounded these methods in various of practices of mindfulness including meditation (Chozen Bays, 2011; Plotkin, 2003, 2008) and theory U presencing (Scharmer, 2009; Senge et al., 2005). Journaling (Richardson, 1994), and art-based activities (Anderson, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997; Leavy, 2009) have also be important to my explorations, discoveries and communication.

Interviewer: My goodness. Why do you need so many practices? Are they all distinct?

Nicol: Good question! I need to explore the complexity of my personal system and the individual world I bring forth. Employing a dynamic, multi-faceted approach enables me to delve thoroughly into my worldview while expressing my self in a vital, engaging way. This vitality promotes integration of human experience and social science
(Bochner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln et al., 2011) which is a secondary desire of this process. Weaving everything together with multiple ways of knowing as participatory inquiry allows this integration to occur. They are not all distinct; there are many overlaps, but each one does bring a different perspective, a different colored thread to the weaving.

**Interviewer:** *Could you explain how you’ve woven them together?*

**Nicol:** Certainly. I’ve woven them together in a progression of interiority investigation, moving from an external, conceptual-analytical perspective to a deeply intuitive perspective.

Phenomenology focuses on our perception of lived experience. Phenomenological exploration illuminates how our perceptions of experience are synonymous with our actual experiences (Anderson, 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Moustakas & Douglass, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). For me, this provided an entry point for both designing the study, and the analysis of the experiences. My understanding of perceptions and “ways of knowing” were critical for the study design. For analysis, Van Manen’s (1990, 2011) phenomenological approach encouraged the study of each experience to be from the perspective of an external viewer. This external approach is compatible with my embodied “objective” training, and is partially shown in these interviews. However, I don’t believe that true objectivity is possible. Integral Theory (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2009; Esbjörn-Hargens & Project, 2010; Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009) describes objectivity as originating from a particular perspective. Throughout this thesis, the external perspective—the interviews—describe a balcony view of my experiences, investigating from the perspective of the observer. The
journals are meant to provide the dance floor perspective, while I was in the experience itself.

Embedded in the thesis is also a subtle sense of the perspectives switching places: the journals providing the balcony view, and the interviews providing the dance floor. This may seem paradoxical, but for me, it held true. Analytics was narrow and intuition was big-picture; my movement from external view to deeply internal view created an altered perspective.

During this phenomenological inquiry I became more clearly aware of the boundaries of my personal values and beliefs (Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), and how they shaped my perception of the journey of reconnecting. My embodied dualities, beliefs and trust in scientific thought gave rise to multiple interpretations of my experiences. Therefore, I also incorporated hermeneutic phenomenological (Cezar Luís, 2012; Chesla, 1995; Guignon, 2012; Hawes, 1977; Sammel, 2003) practices, as a conceptual and analytical view of my personal assumptions. I overtly named my personal assumptions in rich descriptions of my experiences, knowing they could not be excluded. They are implicitly embedded in my interpretations of my experiences, and thus required to keep my story pulsating with life. This created some tension with the external viewer, but as in any conflict management, open dialogue created connection. Within the weaving different patterns of relationship emerged.

Intuitive and heuristic inquiry allowed me to become consciously aware of my embodied trust in control, without becoming entangled in believing that control creates solid unchanging boundaries inherent in the external world apart from my consciousness.
For the purposes of intuitive inquiry, I define intuition to include the more commonplace forms of intuitive insight such as novel thoughts and ideas, together with insights derived from non-rational processes such as dream images, visions, kinesthetic impressions, a felt (or proprioceptive) sense, an inner sense or taste accompanying contemplative practices and prayer, and spontaneous creative expressions in dance, sound, improvisation, writing, and visual art. (Anderson, 2000, p. 2)

Intuitive inquiry invites what is apprehended by my inward senses to be expressed. I used this expression as a way of interpreting my experiences. My opportunities for intuitive expression were critical, so I would not be bounded by what is scientifically appropriate.

Heuristic inquiry brings a “passionate and discerning personal involvement [to] problem solving. [It is] an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self” (Moustakas & Douglass, 1985). It engaged my intuitive and imagining “way of knowing [and] required that [I] be open, receptive, and attuned to all facets of [my] experience of a phenomenon, allowing comprehension and compassion to mingle and recognizing the place and unity of intellect, emotion, and spirit” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 18). Combining intuitive inquiry with heuristic inquiry allowed my inward sense of knowing to be interpreted as an interior experience.

**Interviewer:** So this is a big part of the “hitching to the heart” that you desire—the feeling, sensing, and intuitive part.
**Nicol:** Yes. The intuitive part seems to be lost when I dwell in imagined future scenarios and reductionist thought. I am less aware of the whole, so I need intuition to reconnect to the whole. Heuristic inquiry is also critical.

**Interviewer:** *And the art? I’ve noticed you speak of drawing, photography, and music.*

**Nicol:** The art-based portion of my methodology allowed for non-verbal expression, specifically drawing out feeling, imagery and sensing ways of knowing (Leavy, 2009), which evolved into words through poetry (Anderson, 2000; Langer & Furman, 2004; Moustakas & Douglass, 1985; Richardson, 1994; Sela-Smith, 2001). This methodological combination provided a means for reflective, meaningful probing of my embodiment experiences with nature. This was a critical element in transforming my relationships, recreating my worldview, and documenting the process. Admittedly, the drawing was more challenging than I expected, but the spontaneous poetry was easier! As someone who vehemently spoke against poetry for decades, I find this desire and ability surprising within myself.

**Interviewer:** *And you combined these practices with what you actually did when you were outside.*

**Nicol:** Yes, all these practices enhanced access to my senses, emotion, and feeling, and helped me integrate these different ways of knowing. The experiences were then embodied and communicated in language and images.

~
DECEMBER 31—Crystallization

I’m cultivating a worldview that includes but does not emphasize straight lines of control. While honoring that part of myself, I practice remaining open to fluidity and uncertainty. Therefore, a crystallization approach is applicable (Richardson, 1994). It is no coincidence that our multiple ways of knowing have a parallel in the natural world. “Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose...light can be both waves and particles” (Richardson, 1994). Light dancing through an infinite array of colors, shapes, molecular structures; even some that dissolve and reform under different temperatures and pressures, crystals are a beautiful metaphor representing what I am pursuing in this journey. In the development of a new worldview, crystallization is also appropriate as it “give(s) a definite form or expression to...an idea...or...of an idea...to assume a recognizable or definite form” (Dictionary.com, 2012). Light of my experiences will dance. Through a reconnoiter of my personal outdoor experiences, my written text, and relationships I explore my connections. Embodied cognition, the qualities of my conscious experience, and how they affect my relationships and language are all connected to this dance. This exploration will allow me to
crystallize: I will create a definite expression of my new ideas or frames for knowing and understanding the world.

~

**Interviewer:** So what did you actually do when you were outside?

**Nicol:** I spent two to three hours per day, five days of the week, outside in solitude, regardless of the weather. Occassionally, due to work restrictions, I needed to fragment this experiential time to shorter segments. While I was there, I walked, sat, or stood—whatever I “felt” was right at that moment. At first this was awkward, and I just walked. After several months of this, I didn’t walk that far each day. Instead, I walked and then sat or stood for long periods of time. At all of these times, I was mindful of being in and honoring wild nature.

Sometimes it entailed just listening. Other times I focused on textures and smells, or imaging leaves, trees, and creeks. This was particularly critical while drawing or writing poetry. And of course, I always spent at least part of the time in meditation, focusing on my breath. All of these required me to be present in the moment, using mindfulness practices.

I also used practices of council of all beings or “dialogues with nature” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 167), and “nature as mirror” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 236). These practices are conversations with or reflections on some aspect of the natural world. Sometimes I actually spoke with the aspect; sometimes I wrote what intuitively came to mind while I sat with the aspect. These “conversations” often led to an exhausting outpouring of journaling that led to poetry.

**Interviewer:** So you were journaling while outside?
Nicol: Yes. The intuitive personal journaling while outside and after I returned home captured what emerged during these experiences (Anderson, 2000; Richardson, 1994). I initially set out 15 to 60 minutes for this, but I stopped timing it early on. I just let it flow, and sometimes it came quickly, other times slowly. But it came, and I learned to trust that emergence. [She laughs.] Of course, I did find the journaling challenging some days while it was furiously snowing or raining. On those days, I wrote as much as I could out in the field, and then held ideas in my mind to write once I returned to the truck, or home. That too, was an exercise in mindfulness.

The entries included feelings, sounds, emotions, words I uttered or heard, frustrations, or poetry that I spontaneously or intentionally developed. I also illustrated what I experienced—despite the challenge of drawing snow—or photographed it. This creativity encouraged an outpouring of intuitive inspiration. Again, this was daunting at first, and, admittedly, I’m still nurturing this skill.

Interviewer: In your journals you speak of how vital communications and relationships are. Is this also a primary focus of your research?

Nicol: As with the environment journal, a human relationship journal allowed me to record “situations, events, relationships, places, times, episodes, conversations, issues, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, sense qualities, understandings, and judgments” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 44) around my relationships and language during this time. These relationships are with family, friends, and my work colleagues. I requested consent and an ethical review to include my husband in this work. Any other relationships or conversations that I recorded represent an aspect of my transformative process and communications. I occasionally chose to portray these in poetry or fictional vignettes.
These passages act as additional representations of the mixed genre of personal narrative and writing as inquiry (Bochner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 2000; Richardson, 1994).

I openly discussed these journal entries with my husband, in an effort to gain further clarity. As the person with whom I spend each day and communicate my closest thoughts, I needed his feedback as a way to increase phenomenological perspective.

I also kept a journal that contains quotes and philosophical ideas from books and articles I read.

**Interviewer:** So what were you examining in these journals?

**Nicol:** As a method of enhanced reflection, I re-read the journal entries for themes, and worked with the language intuitively and heuristically to develop the story of my experience. The journal entries and the recorded quotes form the foundation of this story.

I reflected on the dynamics of my interconnectedness and my communication styles. I learned to...am still learning to...utilize mindfulness during my times of engagement with others. In doing so, my intention was to remain “wide open to discover meanings in everyday observations, conversations, and published works. This required that [I as] the researcher be alert to signs or expressions of the phenomenon, willing to enter a moment of the experience timelessly and live the moment fully” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 45). You can see that mindfulness is a reoccurring theme in heuristic inquiry! I also did this while reading, and recording hundreds of quotes that “jumped out at me”.

**Interviewer:** And your analysis—it is intuitive and iterative?
Nicol: Yes, in this form of participatory research, data analysis and research often occur together in a cyclical fashion. “Knowledge is cognitively constructed from experience and interaction of the individual with others and the environment” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 107). As such, I journaled as a form of writing inquiry (Richardson, 1994) and then developed the story of my journey as a mixed genre personal narrative (Bochner, 1997; Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 2000), including artwork, poetry, and journal entries. Throughout the development of the narrative, I searched and reflected on themes (Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Moustakas & Douglass, 1985; Sela-Smith, 2001) that “accentuate the flow, spirit, and life inherent in the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 54).

The process of creating the narrative encompassed the analysis portion of the thesis work, as I was immersed in the material for extended periods of time. “Indwelling…involves a willingness to gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some facet of human experience in order to understand its constituent qualities and its wholeness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24). This included additional time in meditation and contemplation, usually being in solitude or in the outdoors, in order to focus on how I used my language to convey my reality.

Interviewer: Again, more mindfulness and journey.

Nicol: Moving through a heuristic cycle that included time away from the material (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2001) allowed my unconscious to create associations (Anderson, 2000; Capra, 2002). This was particularly challenging at the beginning because I was trapped in the “get it done” way of being. Gradually, that sense of urgency eased and I relaxed into giving myself time. “To know a phenomenon of experience or of nature, we must love it and become its friend. It is as though what is
observed gently yields itself to our knowing. There is no object, no subject, and no intrusion” (Anderson, 2000, p. 2). It is an iterative way of being, cycling again and again through the material, which is in direct contrast to my previous goal-oriented approach to living. Paradoxically, when we slow down, time itself slows down and this creates more space (Chodron, 2000). [She smiles a Big smile.] Einstein’s Theory of Relativity! (Anonymous, 1920; Frisch, 2011).

Interviewer: You are living this journey in an interesting conundrum: creating an exploratory story with no conclusion in a rigid, demanding academic setting. How do you weave these two together, while maintaining the integrity of both?

Nicol: Here is one of the interesting aspects of using a thesis to tell the story of an iterative, exploratory journey. The world of academia requires certain standards of trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability. To realize these, my participatory research and personal narrative must include the “congruence of experiential, presentational, and practical knowing” (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 110). This was accomplished in part through voice, reflexivity, and postmodern textural representations. As the design of my thesis is a mixed media personal narrative, it was essential that my voice be genuinely expressed throughout the narrative, with all my vulnerabilities exposed. Self-awareness and fierce honesty are vital to demonstrate this reflexivity (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln et al., 2011). The “rich, thick detail” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 104) of my journal entries and narrative crystallized (Richardson, 1994) the data of my experience.
Interviewer: You mentioned ethical review for inclusion of your husband, Hans. Whom else are you including in this journey for support, critique and to maintain academic integrity?

Nicol: I created a research process journal wherein the recordings of my assumptions and biases as well as my “perceptual, conceptual, and interpretive orientations and experiences…that exerted critical influences on the research process” (Symonette, 2009, p. 281) in order to inject honesty and transparency, especially in light of the demands of intuitive, heuristic processes. Through continued discussion of my findings in a semi-regular format with members of my 2011 cohort, as well as my husband Hans, I was able to surface potential sources of invalidity, and possible cognitive and emotional blind spots (Symonette, 2009, p. 204). In particular, I asked and trusted Hans to be completely honest, and to challenge me in turn to be transparently honest in depicting my experience. As my journals show, sometimes this was very painful, but it was always enlightening.

As a matter of practicality, I also expected my thesis supervisor, Dr. Bob Kull, to fulfill his role and his responsibility as auditor during this process to insure the reliability of the project. He has done so for which I have deep gratitude for his wisdom.

Interviewer: You were also doing this while working full time as the head of a union organization, raising a young family, and renovating an old farmhouse. Those are tremendous pressures. How did you account for or plan for these constraints, given the enormity of transforming yourself?

Nicol: First, I pursued a process of learning and personal transformation through this thesis, and, as such, I didn’t seek to attain a specific goal or a correct answer. Rather,
I was seeking the realization of richer embodiment, and an exploration of personal change. Not deliberately proving or disproving a hypothesis released an immense amount of pressure, which incidentally, was also part of the journey I was undertaking. What was it like to live without the burden of proving something? It allowed me to sink into what Pema Chodron (2012) calls groundlessness, or the connection of self to the point of no self (Hanson, 2009; Macy, 2007).

Second, time constraints due to familial responsibility and job limitations created challenges throughout this thesis project. My children needed attention, I had to cook dinner, hold executive and individual meetings, balance the organizational budget prior to the annual general meeting, and occasionally “hold this board” for my husband while he worked on the renovation. I allowed for these challenges by incorporating a flexible time management process for environmental experiences, journaling and reading (i.e., At 3AM instead of 3PM), as well as planning my work meetings as much as possible around set blocks of time. Here, too, the mindfulness practices and heuristic inquiry were invaluable, creating expanded time in which to work. I accomplished more in shorter periods, without force.

However, there were some intended aspects of the project that I wasn’t able to do. I originally wanted to camp out in solitude several times during my research period. Due to family, work, and time restrictions, I wasn’t able to accomplish this.

Also, as delimitation, I chose not to include my relationship with my children in the thesis. While it would have been an interesting aspect to this work, my husband and I felt the need to respect their privacy. I have mentioned them, but only where it played into my perspectives or insights.
**Interviewer:**  *When and where did you do this work?*

**Nicol:** This research was undertaken during the autumn, winter, and early spring months. I was grateful for the expansive seasonal time frame, as the sensory experiences in the outdoors during the winter months differ significantly from spring and autumn. I found myself moving with the seasons, transforming as they transformed.

I was in the West Kootenay’s of British Columbia for the majority of the research. As this journey intended to allow for my connection to the Earth during a time of adaptation and change, changing geo-climactic zone to increase diversity of experience was redundant. Choosing to remain in one location for the majority of the project and to embrace the differences that climate change brought to my experience during previously understood seasons of autumn and winter was valuable. Again, the transformation of self, while the Earth itself transformed.
Chapter 8: Winter

JANUARY 7

The snow is falling, blinding the trees in its haze. The big snows are finally here. I'm snowshoeing at Wensley Creek today, cougar territory.

I was warned.

Tromping though the woods, first on the snowmobile path, my thoughts don't really begin focusing on the cougar until I come to deep snow on the cross-country ski trails. I begin jerking at every whomph of snow falling from the trees. My breathing is heavier, and not just from the three feet of fresh powder I am slogging through.

I am alone. My truck is the only vehicle in the parking lot, and the trails themselves are at the tail end of a single lane gravel road bordering crown land. Knowing that I was alone before had brought me pleasure, freedom. Now my knees are trembling, the proverbial knocking together. What if I'm being followed? That's happened before.
Bears don’t bother me. I’ve had many encounters with them over the years while hiking, and even living in rural areas. But cougars are different. Somehow they seem vicious, lithe and cunning cats. The frame of mythology playing out in real life.

What if I am being followed, the cougar stalking me? What to do, what to do...stories of cougar attacks flash through my mind, including that of a former student of mine, attacked when he was four.

I didn’t bring a knife or a gun. The gun would have ruined this experience. Bringing something intended for killing during a time I’m trying to connect to nature? Can we say, “hypocrite?” Somehow a knife seems innocuous. It’s multifunctional, not purely designed for killing. It adapts to what the situation demands.

I snowshoe faster.

The trail is leading downhill and soon I know it will level off and lead to the parking lot. My heart is beating faster. I feel sweat dripping down my back. A voice in my mind says, “This is ridiculous. You haven’t even seen any tracks.”

I come upon it then. A tree—some sort of pine—with enormous slashes in the bark. The slashes begin about five feet off the ground and reach to 15 or 20 feet off the ground. In one section, the bark and a large portion of the
cambium are torn off. Even with today's snow, the indentations at the bottom of the tree are apparent. The enormous imprints in the fresh snow at the base of the tree are hardly covered by the falling flakes. The scent of pine is pungent, oozing from the tree wound. Obviously the cougar was chasing something up the tree. Whatever ran up it to escape the cougar must have been limber—a squirrel perhaps. There aren't many branches left.

I take a deep breath. I can't even stop to take my camera out to document this. It feels as though its eyes are watching me, waiting, waiting.

I continue on down the trail.

Here I reach the critical mass: my heart pounding, pupils dilated with terror, I ask myself, what if it gets me? My mind lapses into logic, and the nature surrounding me dissolves. I'm blind to everything as my rationality kicks in to override my panic. Should I fight it? Or just let it get me? My family is provided for—I have life insurance. I go back and forth within myself, losing track of time, snow piling up on my head and shoulders.

Then my mind clicks. Well, click isn't the right word. Shifts. Is it a type of arrogance that I feel or believe it doesn't have the right to hunt me? My vulnerability is real.

But I'm so alive. I'm here and I am vulnerable, breathing, part of it. I am not separate, and I am accepting it. It is a gift to me that I hold tenderly in my
hands. I am alive, and if I die now, then there is nothing I would rather be doing. I finally grasp myself and give my shoulders a shake. “Nicol, ‘feel the underlying uncertainty—that edgy, restless energy—without trying to escape’” (Chodron, 2012, p. 29). All of a sudden, I release, and...I’m alive.

My heart rate slows. I am no longer frightened. As much.

I breathe and center my self. I am getting more practiced at being fully present. My feet feel heavier when I’m present in the moment. It’s like I’m grounded. Hah. The smell of snow. The sound of trees, me, birds. My mind takes off in a new direction—what is it like living in one spot for your entire life?

As I drive home, I feel myself entering back into society with people. I feel foreign as if I’d been on a long journey and was a part of something else. I feel myself clinging to it, fingers inside me reaching and it is slipping out of my grasp the closer to town I get. I walk into the grocery store and feel tall, straight like a tree. I wonder if I look different and if my words will be different when they came out. I feel as though I’m watching my world through another lens.
Later:

I'm home now. The snow is gentle, furiously accumulating in sky and surface. My house has another layer built on the roof. The branches are thicker. It's quiet. My body is vibrating with life.

How do I keep this while I'm living my everyday world?

An interesting aside—the process of journaling and field-work in snowy, wet conditions—how do I do this?

~

**Interviewer:** I’d like to ask you about death.

**Nicol:** Death. [She smiles, looks down at her feet.] What I think about it? How I feel about it?

**Interviewer:** Yes, especially after this experience.

**Nicol:** I’ve never felt the sense of relief about death as I did then. At that moment, it truly didn’t matter. Of course I recognized the pain and anguish that would be involved, but it didn’t matter. It just was. I was part of it, and I was alive in the moment.

Being alive in that moment was the only things that mattered, and if I died the next, it was okay. The cougar was there, and so was I. Our stories would have been even more together than they were in what actually did happen, two beings crossing paths at slightly different times.

**Interviewer:** Paths crossing. Creating a node of intersection?

**Nicol:** Yes. Every intersection is a node of differing strength, as in a network, as in…like the knots of fishing net. Every relationship is a node, and perhaps death is just
the removal of the physical body of that relationship, and the complete pouring of spirit, of soul into the relationship net? I don’t know…

**Interviewer:** *But you are more at ease with it, and its suddenness.*

**Nicol:** Yes, but I sure hope I’m pouring myself into something I love at that moment.

~

**JANUARY 8**

Today I’m at Box Lake. There is a snowfall warning today, but the sky is light, yellow-tinged gray. Today is council with trees day. They beckon me, to speak of their wisdom.

*Tall*

*rooted in one spot for the entirety of my life*

*I reach up and out*

*Together with my neighbors, I dwell*

*I move, I breathe*

*Yet*

*You cannot see it, not at your pace*

*Slow down,

*Dwell with me.*

*My stillness gives to me.*

*Longevity.

*My attention gives me tensile strength.*

*I share myself with others*

*Lichen, fungi, birds and insects.*

*I share them with you!*
Portions of me break off. It changes me.
So
I reach in another direction, perhaps taller yet
Perhaps.
Yet I live. I grow.
I am what I am, when I am.
I do not seek to be anything but what I am.
The marking paint, the plastic flags.
I wear them, but they give me sorrow.
Like the barbed wire, they become part of me as I continue to grow.
I incorporate them into my being and
It continues to be an ongoing wound, always bearing pain.
Why?
I am alive. I breathe and sink deeply into my self. I feel my soul opening
and the rich warmth of spirit love flows into me. It is well. I am who I am.

I am loved.

I am loved.

I need not be anything but this.

My bum is cold as I sit in the snow. The creek babbles behind me. I
begin to feel every bone, every muscle and ligament in my hips, legs, back, arms,
fingers. My skin tingles.

Part of this thesis is determining my future action. I am feeling stifled
by the education system. I don’t want to go back. Kicking, screaming. I need
another door to open. Please God. You know what I need.
But am I fighting something I should be relaxing into?

**JANUARY 9**

The truck got stuck today. I'm at Vicki's view and tried to park the truck. There was too much snow; the plows didn't plow out the trail pullout. I thought, "I have four-wheel drive! I'll be okay!" I promptly drove in and got stuck. 4H. Nothing. 4L. Still stuck. Oh Shit. You know you're stuck when 4L doesn't do a thing. Didn't bring a shovel. Thank God for cell phone service. I called Hans and he'll meet me here in a couple of hours.

Someone drives right by, looks at me looking at them. They don't stop. I watch them drive into the distance.

I'm going straight up a mountainside today, in four feet of deep heavy, Kootenay powder. This is the snow that the Kootenay's is legend for. I should've brought my skis.

Heart pounding, the sweat is pouring off me. I stop and focus on my breathing and feel my blood racing through my blood vessels. I've gone maybe half a kilometer. I collapse into a snow bank to write this. The steam rises off me as the cold pervades my backside. It feels so good.

As I dressed this morning I put on my bra. It felt so tight, so constrictive. I took it off and put on my shirt. Yes. Why do I wear that damn
thing anyways, to make my breasts look perkier? When I actually think about it, it seems crazy, to force them into a shape they aren’t.

Shouldn’t it be more about comfort? They certainly aren’t large enough to bounce and cause discomfort. What do I choose to focus on?

The snow is heavier today, trees shedding large clumps, rather than the light dustings of yesterday.

I don’t want noise anymore. I used to listen to music constantly: now, only when I want to dance. So much of it feels like noise. Purposeful distraction.

I’m not wearing makeup much either. My skin feels it sitting on top.

Perhaps today the theme is “divesting.”

I wonder how we’ll get the truck out?

LATER

Well, the truck was interesting to get out. Hans hitched his truck to mine and we blocked the entire road—a bit dodgy given the blind, windy corners, and the unpredictability of traffic on a rural mountain road. He pulled me out, despite me not knowing how I was supposed to steer my truck. Apparently we could have torn the back axle off, he informed me afterwards.

Oh well. We didn’t.
At home meditating. My mind scatters incessantly. I keep drawing it back again and again to my breath. I try loving kindness and my mind scatters more. I manage 15 minutes before I'm interrupted; someone else is home. My back and hips ache from sitting on the floor. I try the chair. I read that sitting on a cushion activates our reticular formation; better attention and now I see why. In the comfy Ikea chair, my mind and body drift apart.

**JANUARY 10, 6:45PM**

I love being outside. Feeling alive; seeking my self, my heart, my experience; seeking the moment; savoring the joy, the life.

I wonder if Hans will still love me once this is over? Who will I be? I'm not afraid to show me (as much). I feel stronger, yet gentler. I have stronger faith in God, my source. Yet it's not stronger, not in the traditional, religious sense. My faith isn't constricted by religious orthodoxy. It's deeply personal now.

I am at peace, or getting glimpses of being at peace. I'm less afraid to voice my concerns, my love for certain music in the house, my way of dress.

Frankly, I'm wondering if Hans will keep up to my changes! What changes is he going through?
JANUARY 12

I’ve been violently ill for the last two days. Yesterday it was everything I could do to get out of bed. Bringing one log into the house at a time to keep the woodstove going, I managed three logs before falling back into bed. I vomited all over the bathroom.

I’m beginning to feel a little better today, but I can tell I’m only about 40%. It’s amusing that I wanted to quantify my wellbeing.

The interesting thing about illness was my thinking shut off. My being was about feeling and sensing.

Lying with head on the pillow, my heart was pounding. My red blood cells marched through my body at a regular rhythm. I watched them travel through my ears, down to my toes and back again.

How much of my energy goes towards thinking?

JANUARY 13

When I’m sick, my skin tingles. I’m meditating on being aware of my whole body as I breathe. Whole body awareness and singleness of mind, I’m calmer. I don’t feel as frantic. Everything happens in its way at its time.

I have a history of ramping myself up into a near constant state of sympathetic nervous system activation. Just keep running! Meditation is helping me to not be as excited. I feel calmer after I meditate, able to focus.
I'm also aware that the more time I'm outside, the less music and computer time I need. I don't desire to be on Facebook, or read the news. My connections come from nature, not over the web. I don't need as much stimulation. I am sated by the stillness of the forest.

The three aspects of attention that Rick Hansen speaks of in *Buddha's Brain*, holding onto information, updating awareness, and seeking stimulation; spending time outside seems to alter the balance of these. They seem to be moderated, whereas before I fluctuated between high and low levels of each aspect.

3PM

Every look tells a story. Each word is an experience. The bite of food that enters me is a consummation of relationship. Each connection is vital.

I crave it. I honor it. How do I let my heart work its love into each breath as I live? Each breath itself is also a connection, a joining together. How do I honor my breath? Pay attention, but not with enforced authority. Be mindful; it's inviting and loving in its manner.

My tongue forms words through the intention of my heart. What is the intention of my heart? Deception? Sometimes. But what drives that? Fear, greed, selfishness: these all lead to more suffering. What of love and entering that vast meadow of fruitful freshness where my heart is alive, green and
throbbing with vitality? Our connections are meant to be rich, diverse, complex, frustrating, emotional. Not this suave ever placid, ever calm nothingness that is "objective". Boxed and labeled, cloaked in professionalism, we are never to have emotion. Rationality is the way to enlightenment. Bah! I have trod that path, and it is empty. I will have nothing more to do with it, the staleness, the bland color that robs the light of our life.

The fire smolders, flame licking the logs contentedly. I control its breath, oxygen, and I have only to open the damper and it roars with ferocity.

What says life is peaceful, calm? Yes, there are moments of rest. And then, what makes me ALIVE?

_Snow_

_The ethereal lightness, heavy yet filled with shadow flat and not._

_It hides everything, yet nothing._

_Whose tracks are those? What sound is that?_

_Everything is changed, yet the same._

_JANUARY 14, 3:30PM_

I've been bedridden for four days.

I went out for a short walk today around the back field to see how I felt. Regardless, I was aware of my connections to the Earth. Tomorrow I'll resume my standard research time.
We watched Bowling for Columbine earlier today. The preoccupation with fear depicted in the film was stark. It described how the amygdala and hippocampus keep us fixated on fear and mold our scenarios that build our reality and perceptions. This caused me to wonder how my scenarios mold my perceptions now. I know they have changed tremendously. I am having fewer episodes of elevated anxiety. I still am fearful of some situations; mostly revolving around work; but even with those, I'm able to focus more clearly and look “around them” rather than be taken in by them.

Coming out of the field the snow is in layers, the crust with fine powder on top. Only minus one degree today, it is a beautiful temperature. I can breathe again.

I know I've spoken of the intensity of my senses before. Now their intensity is molding my choices. Smells are so important now. I desire cedar, sandalwood, and citrus. My sensitivity to sound—even a knife cutting carrots on a cutting board is jarring. When voices are raised in anger, I feel my blood pressure and heart rate increase. It all motivates me to control my language, and everything else about my body, before I fly off the handle. I'm more aware of myself as a whole.

The helicopter with heli-skiers just went by in the next valley. I could feel the vibration in my belly.
What message is that vibration sending to the mountains?

**JANUARY 16, 9:30AM**

Today is the first day back at spending extended time outside. My ass in the snow, my mind is all over the place: past, future... What will my action be? Do I truly change careers, or is there a place to work and create change in education?

I need to be here NOW. Can't get mad. That gets me nowhere. My toes are cold. Shitty socks.

**10AM**

The concept of ownership is bizarre. I wonder who has read my proposal and what they thought of it. I'm curious and wish I could track it. I realize that this idea of constantly tracking, knowing who has seen what, done what, owns what; it permeates our culture and education. It drives everything. But why?

Real life works nothing like this. We speak, breathe, act, create and put out into the world. We let it go and others take it, or not. But a part of us is out there, whether we like it or not. The air I breathe, the food and drink I take in and eliminate from my body. It is out there in someone else, part of someone else, as they are a part of me. Does it matter who they are? Maybe. Maybe not.
I tried imaging as a part of presencing today. I struggle with this. I can remember during my chemistry undergrad that I could hold an image of a molecule in my mind and spin it around for minutes, continually. Now I try to trace the image of a piece of lichen, or the bark of a tree and it is intensely difficult to even create the image and hold it. I practice just creating the image. Tomorrow I’ll try again, perhaps drawing.

JANUARY 16, 7AM

I received a health concern email from a union member asking for a meeting today. I was conflicted about whether to encroach on my research time, or allow her full access to my day. I chose to allow her full access, partly out of duty for work, mostly out of compassion for her and health in general.

After I made this decision, I entered into meditation. I was aware after a few breaths my heart was pounding. How could I have not noticed this? It took a good ten breaths to slow it down. Sinking into a feeling of oneness came easier.

I entered into loving-kindness meditation for five people. I started with a politically confrontational community member as difficult, then my dad, kids, and Hans as loved, a work colleague as neutral, and then myself.
I was struck by negative feelings when I turned my attention to my self. How could this be? What did I do? I wanted to brush it off, ignore it. I told myself gently to sit with it and then clarity came.

Since a friend told me in 1997 after Korea, “Don’t be afraid to be myself,” I have done anything but. And now, as Hans and I authentically pursue our selves and our lives, I am headed into the unknown. I am conflicted because I’m also on this path of “mother imitation,” as the approved way to do life, especially in anything that involves school. My mother, the master teacher whom I must imitate in everything I do. I’m no longer doing life that way anymore.

Frankly, I don’t want to do school in that way anymore either. Do I want to be a principal or in leadership? Perhaps I don’t want to be a teacher. When I was younger, I had a dream to be a doctor. If I return to that dream, I have to support my family as an educator for at least two more years as Hans finishes his degree. Then I could begin the trek through medical school.

What do I love: education or healthcare? Healthcare in the traditional sense isn’t my love, but I can see myself being part of the integration of holistic healthcare and traditional western medicine.

But hold on, perhaps this is it; it’s not about one discipline over another, but rather how they are embodied in our culture. Healthcare does have
alternatives that are gradually being accepted and integrated. If education did the same, would I find joy in it again? If I was in educational leadership, could I bring integration to the table? This thought creates curiosity.

I don’t want the stagnation of traditional education. The segmentation, fragmentation is not good for my heart, nor is the inflexible factory model. My heart sings another song. I’m learning to hear it, as it learns to sing. NOW.

My heart no longer pounds.

JANUARY 16, 2PM

*Snowflakes*

*We are together,*

yet

*individually, beautifully distinct.*

Unique, each one. But together,

we create something more beautiful.

*The blanket of paradox. Cold, yet warm to protect.*

*We insulate,*

yet can kill.

*Our purpose is to be part of a season of rest, a reservoir of water for future use. Layer upon layer of us linked together, bonded through changing temperatures and pressures.*

*White, feathery, fluffy, crunchy.*

*We slide off branches, mountains, mittens.*

*We stick to rocks, ice and boots.*

*We accumulate and gather in crevices, wrinkles of the earth*
until there appears none,
until you come to walk upon the smooth surface and find the life underneath.
We disguise.
We are playful.
We are harsh, yet beautiful.
Individually harmless,
together
deathly harmful
unless you are prepared.

JANUARY 17

Today is a day for stillness. None of us slept well last night. Hans and my son were both all over the place. I get up at my required six AM, cranky, and with a headache. I have to fit my research in between nine and 11 AM. The rest of the day is filled with emotionally and politically challenging meetings.

I come up to the hot springs to snowshoe the cedar creek trail. No one is here. I am alone. I hear the Kuskanax River for a while, and then reach the mossy grove, of course, now covered in snow. Open, airy, I am compelled to stop. Silence. Not even a bird, or wind. Nothing. My ears are buzzing. Do I have this static always in my ears? No. This is new.

I end up just standing, eyes open, sometimes closed. I tell my mind to stop talking! So exhausted of always thinking. I just am. Eventually, after 20
minutes or so, I realize this is what its like to be a tree. I join the trees again.

It is good. To be still, quiet. No thinking, planning. Just still.

I return to the truck. Gradually I hear the river. Do I go to the natural hot springs across the bridge? No. I'll save that for another day.

I am still.

JANUARY 18

I'm dealing with an emerging situation at work in which the force of policy is overriding people's desires and values. The school district is making enormous changes in policy and process without communication to the affected people. The resulting complaints are dealt with by mixed messages, political influences, and sometimes, threats of legal action.

These choices are breaking apart a fragile educational system that is still battered and bruised by job action last year. People are exhausted and emotionally spent. It's up to me to lead the teachers' charge, to inform the School Board of these influences. As the elected leaders of the organization, they alone have the power to influence the person making these choices.

The struggle I'm having is not only that I have battled fear and reductionism, now I'm in conflict with a person who, also battling fear, is using their power to make the whole system smaller, fragmented, and fearful. It's a
feedback cycle based on not wanting to face the underlying core of self. Ego rules the system.

I also am fearful of stepping up to the plate and entering into conflict with people who have more power than me.

I have to trust the relationships and how I enter into the relationships.

How to battle in love? How to battle using inclusive co-operative language that invites and doesn’t alienate? Or do we choose to alienate, like a surgical removal? No. That would create more anger. Or do I battle at all?

EVENING

After the day I have had, I welcome the distraction of TV or something mindless. I confronted the Board with the reality of damage to the district system. How appalling that this is happening. How necessary, to protect something you love.

They heard me. I was drained after pouring my heart out in vulnerability and imploring them to consider the evidence I placed into their hands. They heard me. Now it is out of my hands.

JANUARY 21, 10AM

Today the open field called me; be open! See me! And yet I come into the trees and while I feel sheltered, they still, after a moment, say here you are. I feel something release in me, like a disconnection.
Courage to let go.

Open Nicol a little more.

I am a force, yet not a "force".

My wildness,

I don't need to keep it reigned.

Wield my wildness; wield it in love with others.

Vulnerability and joy.

True.

My wildness connects with others and when I find it, I grow, we grow. I can be and share; what is needed will be taken up, when it is needed. I don't need to control it. I don't need to hoard. The resources I need are here.

Trust. I trust that provision and beauty will come. I can trust my wildness.

I am here. I am enough.

I am molding myself, although not into the way others say I "should" be. I am molding myself the way I say I am.

I look for what is needed, who needs my gifts? I am amused for how many years of my life I asserted I had no gifts.

Who am I?

I am a citizen of Earth.

I am part of it, just as much as anyone else. I don't have to fit the mold. I am who I am. I am valuable because I am valuable, for no other reason. I don't have to "prove myself" or be anything to gain recognition or approval.
I am here and I am enough.
I care and I am cared for.
I am beauty incarnated.
I am love incarnated.
I am wildness incarnated.
I am grace incarnated.
I am passion, joy, self-control.
I am boundaries and no boundaries.
I am connected, yet separate and distinct.
I am paradox, limited and limitless.
I am part of it all, part of you all, and
I walk this way.

JANUARY 19

The mindfulness is calming to me. Doing a few minutes of yoga or meditation helps to clear me out, focus. I'm increasingly aware of my words. I seek diversity. Putting things in boxes, including people and situation is physically nauseating to me now. But fragmentation is inside us and I'm certain that it's still in me in other areas. Awareness. More mindfulness.

JANUARY 20

This morning during our coffee, Hans and I were talking about a book he's reading. It talks about wholeness and holiness. Hans was showing how his journey has focused on holiness without wholeness. For me, this was additional confirmation of what I'm doing, seeking wholeness. I'm seeking wholeness,
connection between heart and head, seeking soul and thus spirit. I begin to walk in that constant state of prayer: connection with spirit and heart. I can shed the “I should”. Dwelling in the place of spirit, soul, heart, mind, body I dwell in the morality of I desire what is holy, whole, good, flowing with love for others and myself. I am living in the awareness of our connections and interconnectedness, who we are in each other.

I am reminded of Arne Naess and Deep Ecology.

Don’t live in fear. Live in faith and love of connection to God, to love, to our selves, to each other.

1PM

I’m reading Solitude (Kull, 2008), of Bob dealing with inner angst. I’m reminded of something Hans said to me today. We were making lunch after church and I said I didn’t know why I was so tired. Last night I slept from 7:45PM to 5:30AM. I got up ½ hour before the kids to try to meditate. It sort of worked this morning. My mind was buzzing with work issues: so many tumults, people being deceptive and angry.

Hans said I personalize and internalize everything. I take it in and it creates stress in me. Is it this stress that makes me feel like I’m alive and purposeful? The adrenaline distracts me from the inanity of it, the stupidity and meaninglessness?
What is “it”? Is “it” anything that I encounter that doesn’t jibe with the way I expect life to go?

Can I just choose to face it with loving-kindness? What does that do?

JANUARY 20, EVENING

An acquaintance has publically announced she has resigned from the library to spend more time doing community based initiatives. Intrigued by her decision, I contacted her about following her heart. We’re having coffee tomorrow morning.

I find it fascinating how others follow their heart, how they know how to do that. I desire that ability, but first I must know: what is truly in my heart? What is it I love to do? What is it I want to be? Is my being still centered on my career, what I do for money to support my family? Do I choose to do a job, and feed my soul outside of work? It seems like another duality, another problem of gifts, calling, roles, and responsibilities. Or is this yet another situation of “sink into it” and let it emerge?

It feels like I don’t have any imagination to explore the possibilities.

Things I love:

• Learning/ways of knowing

• Human development: who are we

• Nature
• Authenticity

• Making things; growing things

• Taking care of people, helping people

• Health

• Bringing clarity, understanding

Am I already doing these things?

JANUARY 21, 10AM

I just had coffee with my library friend: an amazing lady. She follows her heart and says that following her heart means things fall into place, including money. It’s finding like-minded people and joining together to make change. It’s finding joy and letting the journey be what it is. It’s about sharing openly and not being scared to do so. Or doing so even when we are scared.

JANUARY 22

Meditation is physically hard work. My back and hips ache. My mind constantly scatters. Again and again I have to return back to myself. I look at the clock. It’s only been 15 minutes? Why is it so hard to be aware and present?
Curious things. I used to come out to nature to escape. Now when I come out, everything is more intense, more probing, more “real”. I can’t escape. Escape is “real life” where there are so many distractions and work and phone calls and computers and food and clothes and...and...and...

Out here I have nothing but myself. Which is the whole point.

Hans said something interesting to me last night. He said that whenever there’s a big change (risk), I’m great until the last minute and then I get cold feet. I say things like, ”It’s not exciting, my heart’s not in it, etc.” And I try to withdraw. I even unintentionally (unconsciously) sabotage things.

Why am I scared of risk? Predictability? Safety? I don’t have to show myself?

The safe path of control is easy. But the pain in my heart says differently. Interesting that I blame it on my heart, even though it’s not my heart, but my head.

Why am I scared of change? Is it because of the probability of failure? But what is failure, really? The dictionary (2013a) defines it as either the lack of success (duh), or an insufficiency. Is this yet another example of scarcity fear-mongering in our culture? Don’t fail, be successful...otherwise there’s just not enough to go around....
The snow is old. It’s strange to think of an abiotic material as old. But it does have a definite life span. It hasn’t snowed in almost three weeks, and there is only a couple of feet left. Everything is showing wear.

I remember 13 years ago, the snow was incredible. To the rooftops and two weeks of -20°C in January. The average temperature this January has been about minus one degree Celsius.

Big deal. Warmer temperatures and less snow; the days are getting longer. Climate change. But when I look beyond the boundaries of my daily world, beyond my reality, it’s different. Australia is burning; so hot that gasoline evaporates before people can fill up their gas tanks (Feeny, 2013). There is flooding in low lying countries (Buerk, 2004; Copeland, Keller, & Marsh, 2012).

And I go merrily on my way, my biggest concern—what does my heart say? Again I’m paradoxically selfish. How will I make my living if I follow my heart? Where do the money, pension, extended health benefits, and security come from? And why does everything have to revolve around money? Does it truly give me that much joy?

When I sit with that question, no, it doesn’t. It’s about security.

Security? What is that? Again, I go to the dictionary. The synonyms listed are “assurance, security, positiveness” (Dictionary.com, 2013b). I find it
fascinating that a synonym of security, positivism, links directly to a paradigm I am personally shifting away from. The positivist, scientific paradigm (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Security: a façade of what makes us feel we’re provided for. Instead of building more façades, what if I put my energy into helping real needs, like the people who are hurting as we go through these climate changes? Or the people who need the skills and understanding to live in this new world that is emerging? People like my children, my students…

Frozen Creek
The wraiths writhe under the ice
Bending, twisting, dark shapes
Slip and slither
There is no size or shape that is constant
Even the path they take is
Different every time.
Fast or slow, large or small.
That one even retreats in
Another direction.
The way they spread evokes fear
In my heart.
I
Can
Feel
My
Pulse.
The image and the
Way it moves.
But I know it’s just air bubbles
Under the ice of the creek.
Why do I fear it so...
Innocent, necessary, continuous.

~

Interviewer: You’re thinking of abiotic and biotic things. What is living and what isn’t?

Nicol: I was reading Thinking Like a Mountain (Seed, 1988), and ruminating on it. I think of the coffee and trail mix I’ve just eaten: almonds, raisins, chocolate chips and dried apples. I think of my cells, the DNA, beginning as half each of my mother and father, multiplying and incorporating my mother’s milk, peaches, apples, and venison. Bison, broccoli, oatmeal, and water, water from how many lakes, rivers and streams? Even though I’ve never been to the headwaters, perhaps now I have, as they are now part of me. I carry them around with me, and expel some, only to be shared with someone else. Even my emotions and thoughts are shared. Nothing is really personal.
I get it, the connection that Naess speaks of (Naess, 1986), where Gandhi explains,

I believe in adraita (non-duality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives. Therefore I believe that if one man gains spirituality, the whole world gains with him and, if one man fails, the whole world fails to that extent. (p. 25)

Everything I do, say, eat, and let go of, affects everything else. And this is not just a mental understanding anymore—I actually feel it.

~

JANUARY 23, 1:15PM

I'm driving to Vancouver for work meetings. I'm in Kamloops at Chapters, having coffee. It was a horrible morning, leaving Nakusp for the ten-hour drive. Immediately, the snow on the first mountain pass, the Monashee highway, was nearly impenetrable, and I followed slow, unsure drivers so I almost missed the ferry. I was driving between 60 and 70km/hour on a road I can normally drive at 85. Nearly two hours later, on the other side of the pass, the roads were bare. I opened it up to 100km/hour and the cops busted me for speeding.

As I spend the rest of the trip driving the speed limit on cruise control (so I don't speed) I'm thinking of two things: 1) Boundaries that society places on us and we place on ourselves, and 2) why I almost always seem to need to be in a heightened state of activated sympathetic nervous system. That shot of
adrenaline; is that why I like coffee so much? And speed? Do I unconsciously seek out emergencies, panic, the hurry up? Is it because then I don't have to pay attention to my heart?

A friend sent me a fantastic quote from The Teachings of Don Juan today. I'll copy it here:

Anything is one of a million paths. Therefore you must always keep in mind that a path is only a path; if you feel you should not follow it, you must not stay with it under any conditions. ... This question is one that only a very old man asks. Does this path have a heart? All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are paths going through the bush, or into the bush. In my own life I could say I have traversed long long paths, but I am not anywhere. Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you. Before you embark on any path ask the question: Does this path have a heart? If the answer is no, you will know it, and then you must choose another path ... A path without a heart is never enjoyable. You have to work hard even to take it. On the other hand, a path with heart is easy; it does not make you work at liking it. I have told you that to choose a path you must be free from fear and ambition. The desire to learn is not ambition. It is our lot as men to want to know... For me there is only the traveling on the paths that have a heart, on any path that may have a heart. There I travel, and the only
worthwhile challenge for me is to traverse its full length. And there I travel—
looking, looking, breathlessly. (Castaneda, 1968, p. 82)

Which path does feed my heart?

Then boundaries. I push against the boundaries such as speed limits etc. But they are a place to rest really. Why do I need to travel at 130km/hour compared with 100km/hour? Why do I have to get there faster? Why can’t I enjoy the day that’s been given to me, not hurrying through it to get it done? What if I meditated and was mindful of the journey that is today? How does today change?

**JANUARY 24**

I’m aware of others’ language and how it affects me. I have been allowing myself to be washed about like waves in the ocean. I no longer want to do this as it affects my relationships including to my self. I am choosing to be aware of others’ language as something that is “over there”. This is an interesting paradox when I also look at empathy, compassion and making connections. But “over there” seems necessary sometimes—especially in work.

I’m at the provincial union meetings with one of my members, a confrontational and politically explosive person. I feel my increasing blood pressure and sympathetic nervous system response. I am working to be aware of his reactions, keep them at arm’s length. But the trick, the paradox, is to
simultaneously make connection with him, expressing empathy to maintain connections, build clarity, dialogue. Allow the “over there” stuff to wash over me, but not make me wash about in the waves.

It’s interesting because I must be mindful, powerfully mindful of all others’ communications. I’m reminded of the frame that I developed at the beginning of this master’s program that communication is a form of manipulation. I want to frame and use communication skillfully.

Breathe. I’m maintaining a steadier state of emotions. My colleague is getting hyped up over the provincial union financial statements, and I’m staying calm.

Yesterday with Hans’ sympathy, rather than empathy with my speeding ticket, I had an emotional meltdown. I was expecting him to provide me with emotional stability, instead of generating it myself. In essence, by being aware of myself, having compassion and empathy for my self, I am taking courage and responsibility for my self and future. What changes, what power do I have in my life? What action can come out of my heart? My action is from me, not others through me. Am I finally getting closer to who am I? Am I facing my self?
I'm reading about shame in a book by Bréne Brown. It's fascinating how so much of her research ties in with this process. She writes of the difference between mere awareness and critical awareness. “Awareness is when we know something exists, critical awareness is knowing why it exists, how it works, how our society is impacted by it and who benefits from it” (Brown, 2007, p. 93). Is this the difference between Scharmer’s (2009) downloading and presencing? Downloading is just being aware that something is there, but presencing is being with it, understanding and knowing its purpose, its way, and its gifts to life (Senge et al., 2005). Brown also describes critical awareness as critical consciousness or critical perspective. Perhaps they are all different ways of explaining the same thing: being present and mindful.

Questions that Brown (2007) lists:

- “What are the social-community expectations around the situation?
- Why do these expectations exist?
- How do these expectations work?
- How is our society influenced by these expectations?
- Who benefits from these expectations?” (p. 94)

Other questions:
• “How realistic are my expectations?
• Can I be all these things all the time?
• Do these expectations conflict with each other?
• Am I describing who I want to be, or who others want me to be?
• If someone perceives me as having these unwanted identities, what will happen?
• Can I control how others perceive me? How do I try?

(Brown, 2007, p. 96)

These are powerful questions for me, especially the last one. Actually they’re all important because I have built my life around this—trying to fit a mold I believed was expected, the conformist. I still do this, tailoring my conversations, my interpretations and explanations based on what I think, what viewpoint I believe they will understand, or sometimes, what they want to hear. It’s especially evident in my work right now, with political machinations. The provincial union expects one thing, my local members want another, Hans another, the school district another. What does Nicol want?

Brown (2007) also speaks of shame screens, strategies we use so we don’t feel shame. Hiding, keeping secrets; appeasing others; using power, aggression, or shame to fight; I do all of these, depending on the context. I
don’t really do what Nicol wants, because I’m fearful of the power of other people. What do I want, what is my power? And how do I wield it?

_Contextualize_ comes from the Latin _contexere_ “to weave or twine together”. It’s valuable to understand the big picture, the whole tapestry. When we contextualize, we see others in the same struggle. I understand this as Theory U’s description of seeing I-in-We.

_Weave the story_. Share what I know with others and remove the mystery. Normalize the story, as I’m not the only one who is feeling this way.

This is the love part of it…

~

**Interviewer:** _So did you actually ever sit down and work through all those questions?_

**Nicol:** No I didn’t. This is humorous, because in the past I would have. And I would have written it all out on a sheet of paper, stuck it in a file and forgotten about it.

Now, here, I continued on with mindfulness, with spending time outside, and these questions wove into my daily thoughts and emotions. My awareness of emotions, of feeling energy and using my senses in the experiences enabled me to answer these questions as I lived them.

It’s more meaningful; I’ve brought the answers to those questions to life in me.

And I have one less file in my desk.

~
JANUARY 28, 10:15AM

It’s snowing lightly but the sun has made the white sky bright. The temperature is about minus one degree Celcius. It took me 45 minutes to find a place where I could park the truck, let the dog go loose, and be alone. Control is on my brain again today. I just got back from the coast and will be dealing with work: more “power over” issues at play.

Hans and I are also dealing with fences and better leashes for the dog. For every layer of control we implement there’s another mechanism we must add. Dog fences, leashes, daily walks. What of just letting the dogs be?

I’m aware of it in my own self; I’m rankling at control. The question about going into educational leadership rears its head again.

I attempt to compare constraint, boundaries, fences, and control. They are all versions of the same thing, swinging me on the pendulum between freedom and rigidity…where is centre that the plumb line steadies at? Or do I keep swinging? It becomes a dance depending on the situation.

The snow is so deep that I can’t go fast. I can’t go smoothly. I move in fits and starts. Several months ago this would have bothered me. Now, it’s okay and I enjoy the opportunity to just stop and be.

My environment and I,
We are the same and one
But when do I notice?
Instead, I'm caught up in the worlds we create...

What about the world we were given?


Fear and trembling

Joy

Unknown.

Fear. My fear is of people who have been given a place, a position of power. What will they do to my life, my control, to me? I know this is the paradigm/culture in which I live. Do I embark to change it? Or run from it?

~

The Imagined Neighbor

Sitting at the kitchen table, he looked out the window. Slamming his coffee cup down, he called out to his wife, “Honey? You need to call the neighbors. Their dog is here again, running through the yard.”

His wife, mopping up the spilled coffee, shakes her head. “She’s just coming over here because she wants to play with our dog. They’re friends. She’ll go home again, she always does.”

“It’s the principle of the thing. They need to control their dog. Look at it, chasing the birds, oh, did it just chase that deer out of the yard? Oh, that’s it…”

He grabs the phone, furiously punching the numbers. A heated conversation ensues with the neighbor. The wife hears the dog being called home; sees their own dog looking out the window. The dog whines, and goes to the door.
“There. I called them and they better keep that animal under control. It’s just wrong that that animal can run anywhere, chasing everything. It’s going to teach our dog bad habits. Those deer can’t be chased; we need to protect them! Why can’t they keep things on their property, like we all do? Unbelievable. The gall of those neighbors to let that dog run amok—what are they thinking?” He looks at the dog scratching at the door to go out, then stands up and walks down the hall. “Please put our dog in her cage—I won’t have her damaging the door. Maybe I should give the neighbors a copy of my book; they could learn something about taking care of nature and keeping things in control.”

The wife continues to look out the window, her hand resting on her dog’s head. Outside, she watches the birds swoop through the air and the deer walk through the flowerbed.

~

**JANUARY 30, 9:30AM**

I was actually successful at meditating for a full 30 minutes uninterrupted today. I received an image of hands holding my shining heart. Perhaps because I had been focusing on loving-kindness?

Control: letting go of control and focusing on people. That’s what I enjoy. Focusing on people and our health of mind, body, and spirit. Healthy food, healthy activities, healthy family, and community. I also had an image of us on a farm, holding dinners made with homegrown ingredients for a limited crowd.
Cabins, people staying there. Shakespeare’s Gardens I would call it; the farm on Shakespeare Road. Nourishing, helping people grow...

11AM

We have ordered a fence for our property: about a week until it arrives and we can install it. Now I’m absolutely focused on keeping our dog under control since our neighbor complained about her wandering. She’s not outside alone without being tied up. Even playing with the kids.

Here’s the interesting part. I’ve been doing a lot of research on the back three acres of our property. My dog often joins me and wanders around, checking in with me. Now I can’t. I’m unwilling to leave her at the house tied up. My heart wrenches when I look at her. I can’t take her on a leash to the forest. Not only will I not get anything done, but that’s just cruel to her.

I’ve tried driving to places where I can let her off the leash. It works moderately well, but then I have to drive to find a spot for her to run. It takes additional time out of my day to get there...the logistics, the layers multiply.

Today, to avoid the driving, I try walking on the old railway bed. To get to it, I walk a couple of kilometers from the house.

First I notice the whole straight road leading to the path. Destination. Goal orientation. Speed. I actually prefer the meandering now. Even on a straight road I’ll stop and stare off at the trees or take moments of reflection.
Once on the railway path though, I let her off the leash. She begins to run. I begin to panic. The highway! What if she gets hit by a semi? Where did she go? Merrell! Merrell! Panic. Oh my God. My heart is racing, my breath and vision get narrower. I’m turning around in circles, not really seeing anything, yet looking, looking.

Then. There she is. I call her—she runs to me, skidding to a stop in the snow, her joyful tongue lolling out of her mouth. She bounces in the snow.

But I’m still panicked. I try walking again. She runs again. The semi trailer trucks on the highway above us roar. I call her and put the leash on her and begin walking home.

Why am I writing this? There are several reasons.

**Control.** When I try to institute control, the quantity of control mechanisms I have to assemble become cumbersome, costly, and all encompassing to my being.

**Loss of trust.** I don’t trust anything when I’m seeking control, least of all myself. I panic and fear. My body physically is constantly in a state of heightened adrenaline. I worry. Trust is gone: the dog, other people, vehicles. Anything.
**Isolation.** When we control, we isolate. We can’t trust that other people, other life won’t disrupt the pattern we’ve determined is correct. As a result, our relationships are fewer, or less intimate. How is that healthy?

My world has shrunk. The challenge of living in the present, and embracing connections has increased 100-fold.

Our entire society is built around control. But what if we could trust? Actually have a community where dogs could roam freely and go and visit their friends? People could share a communal load of firewood, or snowplow or garden? Kids could play, and drivers would be conscious of their presence on the road?

My mindfulness plummets when I live in “control”. So how do I move with this?

**JANUARY 31**

It feels like spring. It’s the last day of January and it was raining earlier. So mild that even with my down vest open and no toque, I was sweating. The road was bare of ice and snow. My body wanted to run.

Today I Skype with Bob in preparation for my university interim report. Funny, I still get immensely nervous prior to speaking with Bob. Why? Skittish? Perhaps because I’m afraid of him seeing me as I truly am: I sense his ability to do so. And yet it’s great once I’m actually speaking with him.
My emotions are often overwhelming me now. I feel more intensely. I'm welcoming them. Not repressing them. Welcoming them opens me and they pass swiftly or softly linger. I spend far less time fretting now. The scenario creating is less. It rises when I'm stressed.

I'm getting better at speaking up. I'm finding my voice.

Paradoxes. Life is rife with them. They're everywhere. We think we are consistent; like one of my co-workers telling others they are irrational as he gets increasingly emotional.

Hans spoke of his dreams and how he's feeling anxious and fearful of failure. We were able to have an interesting conversation about our unconscious and how it makes its way into our thoughts and behaviors. Instead of repressing it, welcome it. Acknowledge it.
Chapter 9: Living in Paradox

Interviewer: You wrote on your Facebook wall the other day, “The paradox of dwelling in one paradigm while embedded in another cultural paradigm emphasizes the necessity of precision, richness, and compassion in our communications.” Can you describe what compelled you to write this statement?

Nicol: This is what my life has become now. I dwell, choose to make my home, in one paradigm of connection, change, wholeness, but I am embedded in a reductionist society and workplace. Efficiency, control, obedience, and quantifiable programs define the reductionist culture. Develop the program, implement it, record the results and analyze the data. I don’t live in this place anymore, and frankly, I don’t want to work there anymore. There is disconnect between the two…my life and my work, they need cooperation. Better yet, harmony.

Interviewer: Do you see a way to create cooperation or harmony with work and life?

Nicol: Yes, and I think presencing and relationships have integral roles. I wrote that Facebook post preparing for an administrative interview with a school district. I entered into this master’s program, partly because I wanted to become a school principal. And I still feel that I have a lot to bring to the table around that, but my motivation has
changed. It’s no longer about being in control, or being the “leader”. Instead, it’s about changing the story of what education is and how we do public education in British Columbia.

We’re living in between stories in human culture today and our educational institutions are enormous obstacles to change. But they are also enormous opportunities to co-create change, not only in the institution and in the employees, but also within students. I recognize some preliminary conversations in educational institutions occurring. But shifting an entire organization into a learning, adaptive organism of interdependent wholes that purposes around the same intention—human development as an interconnected part of nature…this takes careful and deliberate…presence.

How to do this? “By suspending our normal analytic ways of thinking, we allow ourselves to encounter the system directly” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 40). When we encounter the system directly, with all our ways of knowing, our primary knowing (Rosch, 1999), we open our hearts and make what I call, “the whole system connections”. At this point, we have the opportunity to change our language, our perceptions, and our actions.

When we have these conversations, I believe it works better when said in love, compassion and with sincere empathy. At the beginning, this was incredibly challenging for me. It does get easier with practice, especially as I encounter the whole system more frequently.

Empathy and compassion…it’s constant! Unending! It happens in virtually every conversation, purely because it’s about making connections with others (Brown,
And when we embrace it, the connections change everything about our world and who we are.

But we are in a culture that values standardization, competition, destination, and quantification. All of these, do you see how they are a different type of story? How do we bring our awareness of wandering, curiosity, interconnectedness, and appreciation for individual context back into the human story?

**Interviewer:** *Precision, richness and compassion.*

**Nicol:** Yes, and I don’t think it’s any coincidence that these are also several of the criteria for validating qualitative data (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ellis, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2011). I feel that this is evidence of my expansion, changing my story to a postmodern participatory worldview. Now the question is, can I actually do this in everyday life?

**Interviewer:** *And?*

**Nicol:** I find I can do this the more I practice. Even during stressful situations—for instance, that job interview I was preparing for—I was definitely using that type of language. Perhaps not as skillfully as I needed to—I didn’t get the job. But, were they ready for it? Were they receptive?

That’s the other piece; the boundaries that people place upon themselves and their work situations. What is work? What is “professional” language, and what topics can we consider during an interview? Can an interview consist of conversations about what is successful and exciting? Or should an interview merely be a sell-job; I can do this, this, and that, and that’s why you should hire me. It depends on what type of work place
will feed your heart. Hence, I’m choosing to live more frequently in a place as Senge et al. (2005) describe as,

Dissolving the boundaries between seer and seen leads not only to a deep sense of connection but also to a heightened sense of change. What first appeared as fixed or even rigid begins to appear more dynamic because we’re sensing the reality as it is being created, and we sense our part in creating it. (p. 43)

I’m seeing patterns unfolding and situations in which I shake up people’s conception of normal more and more frequently. Some people see it and embrace it. Some are confused. Others are angry and shut it out. Interestingly, I am getting more adept at recognizing these, through sensing and feeling their energies, and I can then choose to respond to it. “Our willingness to hold and consider different stories can free us from being isolated in our own” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 72). When I’m present in the moment, I’m not angry or upset at their reactions if they are unwelcoming. Instead I just find it interesting, intriguing. And then comes the choice—to engage or not? What type of language is necessary? I begin to weave a story, and the storyteller must know her audience.

**Interviewer:** And you have the language prepared? Or does it flow?

**Nicol:** This is another part that I’m learning. It seems to flow when I’m with others who welcome the ideas. I consciously manipulate and mold the language when I’m with people who are confused. When people are angry and shut down, I try to lay my words gently down to rest. I don’t feel the need to strive, or force when I’m present in the moment. It’s as if I’m at peace and willing to give them their choice. It’s like an act of love. Of course, I’m not always able to do this, as I’m still learning.
This is consistent with what Fredrickson (2012) says, “Put simply, it's far easier to connect with another person, when your desire, bond, commitment or trust is present and strong. So these players are both cause and consequence of loving connections.” Love brings connection, and connections bring love. It is yet another example of paradox and complexity.
Chapter 10: Winter to Spring

FEBRUARY 2

We went out for dinner last night with two couples with young children. The “silent witness” that I’m increasingly aware of was sending me much information. During our conversations after dinner, I felt one of the ladies was shutting off as I tried to contribute. I didn’t want to take over and lecture. This balance is challenging because I feel I have a large amount of theoretical, scientific knowledge that I can use to justify my position, my arguments. But I was also aware that they were more aware of their emotions and heart and soul than I have been. I was conscious of modifying my conversation: give a little, back off a bit. What is the appropriate balance of give and receive? I have watched myself doing this in other conversations as well.

FEBRUARY 4

I’m reading The Gifts of Imperfection (Brown, 2010b). The author describes a major part of my journey, welcoming imperfection and chaos. She
makes several points to consider, centering round shame, guilt, and fear, and also story. However, she comes at them all in an analytical manner.

More iterative cycling of my path.

I am reminded: be mindful of the emotions creating physical reactions that I can sense and understand as shame. Once I’m aware, then I make a choice in response. As I practice, I find much of my shame is self-generated. Very little is triggered by the actions or words of other people.

And story: it is showing up everywhere: how I do this thesis, at work, and now in books I’m reading. “Story is about worthiness and embracing the imperfection that brings us courage, compassion, and connection. If we want to live fully, without the constant fear of not being enough, we have to own our story” (Brown, 2010b, p. 46). What a powerful message for this work I’m creating.

As well, this quote spoke emphatically to me. “Our stories are not meant for everyone. Hearing them is a privilege, and we should always ask ourselves this before we share. ‘Who has earned the right to hear my story?’” (Brown, 2010b, p. 47).

This point is interesting. I can choose to hide my story—my heart—or be open. My thesis will be a public document; I can only trust that the people who
have earned the right by their own inner work will be able to hear it. And perhaps they will resonate with it.

Authenticity. I’m choosing to be real, to be honest and show my true self. It is audacious and courageous. The courage flows when I’m present.

I have a choice of path: calculation or presence, remembering that each is embedded within the other. I can calculate and regulate my shame resilience to generate authentic courage, or I can be present and flow into authentic courage.

I stand tall. I am here. Present.

FEBRUARY 4

I had coffee with my library friend this morning. She had read my thesis proposal and it was fascinating to hear her activism stories, relationships, and heart learnings. She shared about the writer’s festival on climate change that is being organized in a neighboring town; the whole theme is despair. She was supposed to be involved, and left the first organizational meeting because she couldn’t stand the negativity.

How do we not fall into despair around climate change? I shared my story about a professor I had, who lived in fear of life and everyone around her. Her class embodied her fear and trembling, an exploration of eco-psychology and climate change from the perspective of fear. My friend and I thrashed
ideas around but decided that connection, courage, and contextualizing were key to avoiding isolation, despair, and fear. As the climate changes, we can’t hide ourselves to avoid it. Connecting to each other and the other-than-human world, the fear of the transition, the unknown seems to dissolve... I have a choice as I continue to grow and learn, as the Earth’s climate changes.

Living in our hearts, and our hearts are good! The fear dissolves as I face it and ask my Source what connections support me. My connections to nature hold me. Trusting, I let others see me, and my connections to people emerge and flourish.

The way I connect with people is reflective of how I treat the Earth, how I treat myself. It is all one and the same. For I am part of the Earth, and it is part of me.

**FEBRUARY 5**

I needed this. I haven’t been able to come outside for a solid two hours since last week. Between work and family responsibilities and school “interim reports” my time has been eaten away to leave me with only 20 minutes here, 10 minutes there. The extended time today is a relief to my soul. I am alone. The trees say stop. Be still.

The snow is melting. There are great patches of bare ground. My footsteps firm; back onto the snow they slide, uncertain. Is it a metaphor for me too? As I journey out of this time where I feel frazzled, disjointed, will my steps be firm again? Wondering if I will always be stumbling and sliding, part of me longs for stability. Another part knows I accept and secretly relish the slippery journey.

I suddenly yearn to buy a piece of crown land, build a cabin and live off the land. This hermit urge is a warning to me. My silent witness nudges me.

Withdrawal.
Solitude.
It sounds quietly and beckons me with peace, but...
I approach with caution, if my intent is isolation.
If it’s isolation, I begin to mistrust,
even my self,
and withdraw further.
If it’s connection, then I heal.
Relationships are what hold me together.
I had grief today, being out in the forest. I acknowledged it, and choked up a bit. It was really the first time I felt sorrow for what humans have become compared with what we are capable of being. We exert control, holding analytical calculations as God to make us gods. As a result, we have become less powerful. We are stunned and immobilized by the changes the Earth brings forward, that we have created. Our calculations fail us, and we flounder.
Instead, we can use our collective wisdom to become more. Letting go and entering into compassionate, loving flow, we create in the emerging present moment. By surrendering our individuality into community, we become vibrantly powerful individuals, capable of creating, protecting, moving with change.

The paradox of being.

One part of me shifts puzzle pieces in my mind, frantically searching for an answer: one right way to do life. But my silent witness says there is no permanent universal answer. Only partial, context dependent, transitory answers...flex and bend, flow and jump...

LATER

For the first time in my life I understand why people are activists. Because they freely pursue what is strongly in their hearts. They refuse to silence their heart voice. I get it.

The water in the creek flows and lulls me into no words.

I am here.

I am.

Present.
FEBRUARY 7; 6:30AM

Didn’t get much sleep last night. Dog woke me up in the middle of my REM, awake for four hours and then finally fell back asleep. My son was up at six.

I had a mind-joggling talk with Hans last night after the local union meeting. I got home, frustrated and tired from all the emotional whining and manipulation and complaining. Hans and I spoke about applying for administrative vacancies. I felt excitement, then apprehension, and fear.

Pondering the return as a vice-principal, working with people I currently represent for the Union, I said, “Lots of people will be very upset at me.” I could feel shame and its arrows piercing my heart. “You’re not good enough, who do you think you are?” Just as Brown (2010a) described in her shame research.

Hans said, “Why are you going there?”
Normally when Hans says things like this, I get defensive. More shame. But this time, I said, "I don't know." My tone was different. It was like something had clicked over in my mind.

I was then able to share with Hans about shame resilience, the ability to look shame in the eye, let it go, and turn it around. I shared how shame affects me, like a noxious fume-filled swamp in my soul. This is a turning point. I'm having the courage to step forward regardless of what others think or say, because I'm pursuing what I want. And I want that leadership opportunity, that ability to care for people and help move the organization towards something that is creative and connected. I remember, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of creativity, innovation, and change" (Brown, 2010a). As long as I continue to walk in vulnerability, in integrity, honesty and transparency, with love, then I can hold my head up. I don't need to be ashamed.

It's freeing.

FEBRUARY 8

It's been a very exhausting couple of days. Work is treacherous; lots of arguing and in-fighting, etc. Labor unrest is rampant with multiple committee arguments.

As I'm meditating, I'm trying to show love and compassion for my self. It's much easier to do this for others. My self, I rarely get past a very
superficial level. I feel unsettled; my mind more easily jumps around. I can't
hold attention on it. There's another little voice/feeling that says, "yeah right."

I'm conflicted by this as I'm told to love my neighbor as I love my self.
But what happens when I don't love my self?

**FEBRUARY 11**

Bréne Brown (2010b) speaks of living wholeheartedly, interweaving
creativity, courage, compassion, and connection.

The creativity part: drawing takes me to a different place. Words aren't
there, but they are. I'm just not aware of them. I feel glad when my hand
makes the object I'm drawing look the same on paper. I also feel glad when it
looks different.

To create requires energy, focus: powerful attention. It's really another
form of mindfulness. The poetry comes more easily than the art.

Dance. I also love this.

I'm drawn to food. My family is getting a wide variety of very different
meals these days. Wild rice gratin, with spinach and caramelized onions;
buckwheat—millet pizza with roasted peppers, bacon, caramelized onions and
green apple slices; slow roasted venison with maple glazed carrots and oven
roasted fingerling potatoes. My daily challenge behind every meal is whether
the ingredients are homegrown, gathered or caught, non-GMO, organic, heritage
or heirloom variety. How diverse are the flavors? How many colors are on the plate? Layer upon layer of smells and textures...

For my garden this year all the seeds I purchased are heirloom/heritage non-GMO varieties. I deliberately chose these as even looking at the other options gave me a visceral response of “No!” I have chosen vegetables that my family will most likely not recognize. I will be growing grains for the first time. We will be eating onions next year that first were cultivated in the 1800’s. It’s an adventure with story, growing in my backyard.

I am enjoying the stories behind the seeds as much as the produce that will emerge. And as I nurture them and eat them, they will become part of my story.

~

**Interviewer:** Feminine and masculine, creativity, I’m sensing you wish to share something about this.

**Nicol:** Yes. This is the part I didn’t expect in this journey—the desire to create. I would say it truly began with the night of getting the guitar out. Just playing with sound and allowing my self to freely play was part of entering into a freedom of soul. I had never felt that before with music, as I had always played in the context of lessons, reading music on the sheet, learning composers. But to play, and let that be legitimate! It was almost like I was flowering, my soul stretching out and breathing new color, just as a blossom does in spring.
Plotkin (2008) says, “Something in us is truly wild and wants to stay that way through our entire life. It is the source of our deepest creativity and freedom” (p. 253). Playing like this, my soul is uncovering that dimension of wildness.

I wonder, as the climate changes, if the Earth is going to play awhile until it finds a path to follow…

~

**FEBRUARY 13**

My senses remind me this exploration is really never going to end for me. I just now have an effective tool. Mindfulness. And like the winter that is gasping its last breath here, I will also have times of returning to old habits. Hopefully, my awareness will emerge and remind me of this journey.

**FEBRUARY 16**

I went for a run Thursday morning. It felt good, my body stretching, panting with exertion. Spring is emerging from the sleep of renewing winter. I feel the same. I’m aware of my unknowns. I know that I don’t know. Nicol, don’t forget that I know that I don’t know.

My meetings with people are richer with inclusion language: “who are we as people” language, “what are the boundaries we’re placing” language, “what is in our hearts” language.
“When people in leadership positions begin to serve a vision infused with a larger purpose, their work shifts naturally from producing results to encouraging the growth of people who produce results” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 141). What is the vision of the larger purpose? Perhaps it has to do with our connections, our natural world and our place in it? This is what is happening to me, what I hope to bring to the table.

Whenever I’m outside now I breathe.

I hear and welcome what is singing in me.

FEBRUARY 17

My doubt of self-love has raised its head again. The last three days I’ve been yelling a lot; constantly frustrated with my family members and work. I think people notice and are appalled. I try to explain it to my family. I hate conflict, yet I’m creating more conflict trying to resolve conflict. I hate noise, yet I create noise trying to get rid of noise. I hate violence, yet I’m creating violence trying to be rid of it. I am embodied paradox and irony.

I’m struck by what one of the books said about self-love (Plotkin); I teach my kids to love themselves because I love myself. This ties in with “love God as I love myself.” Love others as I love myself. What happens when I don’t love myself or I don’t love the life I’m in?
I have deep regret over not taking risks. Why didn’t I travel to Europe, or go to the pubs in Nelson? Would my life have been different...?

My entire identity is wrapped up in fucking control. It feels like everyone runs around my back saying, "Mrs. Suhr the freaky teacher who is all about fear." FUCK! I HATE IT! I don’t want to be this fucking person!

FEBRUARY 18

Over the last two days I have had conversations with two different people who don’t know each other. Both shared a similar perspective about me that shook my core: I am being manipulated in my relationships, and they are limiting me from my potential. I have a decision to make, to break free of succumbing to manipulation, guilt, and being pushed into a box. Do I reach deeply into my self, reaching through my mind to my heart, my soul, to my deepest relationship, my ties to God, and stand tall in who I am? How do I become the woman I’m meant to be? Questions, questions.

Nicol, slow down. You’ve already started to do this. Look at these experiences as an invitation to go further.

My love for myself is growing. The flame of love and gratitude is stronger and brighter. I needn’t diminish it to make another feel better. Instead of comparison, it’s about being in the connection, trusting that each of us is doing the best we can at that moment. Sometimes this can be painful, to
have no excuses, while being compassionate and honest. But what happens when we can have these honest conversations about our fears, our dreams, and concerns?

1 Corinthians 13: 1-7

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (The Holy Bible, 1988, p. 1307).

FEBRUARY 19, 10:30AM

About two weeks ago, I thought to myself, “I think I’m done with my research. Time to start writing this thesis.” I continued journaling on relationships, but I lost my focus. The only time I’ve been outside is for a walk or a run.

I realized in about a week I was still doing research.

So, here I am again. Out in the forest and realizing after a two hour conversation with Hans, how ingrained my way of scientific, formula based,
1...2...3 thinking is. Broken? Fix it. Try counseling to improve your relationships. Get the thesis done. You've got enough data to wing it. I'm invited to awareness of my habits. I'm invited to change them.

It's treacherous walking with ice and bare ground, just as this stage I'm in. What process, what worldview am I living in?

Do I have to articulate a worldview in order to be a person of integrity?

What about accepting and living in process, change, and adaptation? It's excruciatingly terrifying. “Intuition is not a single way of knowing—it's our ability to hold space for uncertainty and our willingness to trust the many ways we’ve developed knowledge and insight, including instinct, experience, faith, and reason” (Brown, 2010b, p. 89). I can trust my intuition.

My brain is worn. I'm tired. I want to give up and say to hell with it. And yet, I know my relationships are healthier and blossoming. I'm gaining confidence and insights that I've never had before. My way of relating to my husband is changing. The hard part is working through my insecurities and people warning me of being manipulated. But isn't all relationship a form of manipulation? I think of manipulation as a bad thing, but all it really means is handling something skillfully and with loving intention. It almost becomes an imperative—handle things skillfully and with love.
What are interconnectedness, relationship, change, adaptation, mutualism, and parasitism?

**What is my choice about what I believe?**

LATER

Worldview. Do I think I need one to anchor myself, like a tree? All organisms in some stage of life take flight and go somewhere else. It may be for a moment, like a fungal spore, or for a lifetime, like a hummingbird.

Why do I expect myself to be anchored to a permanent ideology in which I live my life, a refuge? Do I enjoy or desire easy answers, a fixed job, fixed location, instant success? Hmm.

Why do I love to be outside? It’s because it teaches me my own path. Who and what should I model my behavior and lifestyle after? Creation. Who am I connected with to make it happen? I am connected to my Source, the creator, just as the rest of creation is.

*I am in love.*

*I

*Am

*In

*Love.

**FEBRUARY 20**

I don’t have to be afraid.
I don’t have to have answers. It’s an incredible sunshiny spring day. The sun against the mountains is inspiring.

I awake,
feel alert and alive.
I breathe.
I know.
I feel.
I sense.
I have joy.
I have power in myself.
I am quiet.
Still
And
yet the movement within me is patient.
Not aggressive.
I can embrace and invite.
I do not have to demand or expect.

FEBRUARY 22

Love is an action. It is a feeling and a choice. The beauty of love is in me; flowing through me, awakening my body, mind, and spirit. I have energy and flight. I am beautiful and that beauty flows out of my hands, my eyes, my lips into, upon everything around me. My choice.

I dwell in love, in the spirit of love. And it dwells in me.
My urge to create comes from love. Mother Teresa as quoted in Senge et al. (2005, p. 139) said, “You cannot do great things. You can only do small things with great love.” I bring that to all my relationships, my interactions, whether with plants, animals, people, trees, the earth.

I am vibrant. I am alive. I am enough. It is good.

FEBRUARY 23

Today was an extraordinary sunny day. Yesterday it snowed six centimeters. Today it melted. As the season changes I am acutely aware of how I anticipate change. I welcome it, long for it. The part that seems to becoming easier is the transition through it. The journey. The flux of moving back and forth between winter and spring: between my old self and my new self is easier. The tension between is easier to bear. Or is the tension itself easing?

There are days when I find myself longing for control. Then I realize what I’m doing, relax into the moment, and the tension disappears.

When I think about money and success, I find my self day-dreaming about a different life, no longer content with what I have. The controlled isolated life beckons, whispering, “You don’t have to think about anyone else.”

Segmentation and fragmentation: analysis and calculation. It’s clean: neat and tidy.
But mental scenarios of living calculatingly drive me to near anxiety and panic.

Then I relax and let go of the expectations of what life should be, “Act like this”, “do this, “say that”, “be this way”. Maybe tidiness has merit for some. My life certainly isn’t clean, neat and tidy, but it’s also not painful, lifeless. Energized, I let go of the calculations and become more completely me. My gut, my intuition leads the way, and my life flows.

**MARCH 3**

I did my meditation first thing in the morning today. I am aware of the peace of the forest.

I was at a meeting recently with a variety of community members. One of them remarked on the evils of labor unions. I didn’t immediately react, but took the comment and spun it in the air for a while. After a few days I was able to develop a response. I went to the person and sat with him in a quiet place and shared my concerns. We both left feeling heard and moving forward with compassion.

I remarked to Hans that I would never have been able to do that a year ago. He agreed with me, chuckling that I probably would’ve said something I shouldn’t have.
Jubilant in that experience, today I am yanked back down into the iterative nature of this journey.

Traditionally I shun social events, but I have emerged from this shell over the last few years. Attending a toddler’s birthday party, I am initially comfortable and then begin to isolate myself.

The house is architecturally divided. I divide myself from the others. Several local mothers arrive, as well as another “hip” lady I don’t know. You know the type, crazy hair color, interesting clothes, always knows the right thing to say, and knows everyone. Let’s face it, I am jealous of her.

I immediately begin to make assumptions unconsciously that increase my unease. I get snippy. My daughter feeds off my energy and imitates my snarky attitude. I authoritatively correct a young mother on a minor biological fact. I feel separate and angry. I admit trying to change my angry, lecturing behavior to an acquaintance. This vulnerability creates enough empathy that I am able to engage in small talk. But I leave the party tense, agitated. I am my old self. All power, no love.

We arrive home and the kids and I go into the forest.

Green, green, all green.

When I’m angry and lecturing and isolating, I’m living in the present but through old habit patterns. I’m proving something: competing to be the best.
What is it about social situations that trigger this response? I’ve been doing so well! Actually relating to people! And now today I feel like I am right back at the beginning.

Breathe.

My heart is racing. I can’t go back to that. I don’t want to live in anger. The fear is physically rising again. Stop it. Stop it. I’m shaking. My mind is writhing. Even writing this, I’m feeling disjointed. The words are barely legible, the letters malformed.

LATER

I explain the situation to Hans, and immediately, the panic releases. He is so gracious and concerned. Oh, the freedom and connection that comes from vulnerability and exposure.

I must learn to remain conscious of this possibility, situations that trigger my feelings of isolation, so I can reorient myself.

MARCH 4

In the forest today the energy of God’s creation enters my heart. The trees raise their branches as my arms and hands do. The Light pours into my soul and I am here. I am present. I need not be or do anything more.
There are no mountains or valleys. There are no blessings or curses. There is no time. There is only peace, joy and beauty. Life flows through me and I am connected to it all. It is enough. It is good.

**MARCH 6, 1:45AM**

I've begun transcribing my journals. I want to have them completed by spring break, when we leave for O'ahu. As I draw to the end of the research phase, I'm keenly aware of the continuous nature—no beginning or end—of this journey. Sculpting it into the space and restrictions of a thesis seems artificial, insane even. Can I really pull it off? And in doing so, I feel I'm bucking like a wild horse, loosening the reigns of academia, time, and responsibility. The looming authority of academic restriction is a shadow of our western human journey. The restraints are falling off and my adrenaline jolts me awake. I smile inside.

My journey. I ask myself, do I want my life to be restricted and artificial? Perhaps and perhaps not. There is a lot in my life that is good, the warmth, the comfort, and security.

Is there a lot I would change? Yes, and I'm in the process of doing so. My family is much more concerned with food and relationships than we ever have been. I am aware of the power in my life now, and how I can use that in my work.
What if my work is to bring story and journey, creating and connections back into education? This seems like a real possibility to me, given the relationships I've cultivated.

My being and nature; my soul is alive.

Are my head and heart hitched? Absolutely.

Can it go further? Yes.

Will the connections become richer, stronger, more vibrantly alive? I wonder.

With every journey, every present moment I am, feeling the frigid waters of the spring runoff, the shocking heat of autumn sun, and reassuring warmth of my winter's fire. I am part of it. I am not separate from any of it, and I welcome this connection. I choose it. And I invite you to choose it too.
Chapter 11: Spring

APRIL 18

This is my journey. The journey moves me. I can sense the doors opening before me. I know a cloud of witnesses surround me and I feel the weight of that mantle. “Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands” (Hogan, 2007). I must allow the love to flow through me and open the doors it wants to.

Where do they lead? I don’t know.

But longing for and clinging to what I have that is good now, is no excuse for not walking the path before me, the path I create. I must trust that what is in the future will also be good. It will also be cherished.

Traveler, the path is your tracks
And nothing more.
Traveler, there is no path
The path is made by walking.
By walking you make a path
And turning, you look back
At a way you will never tread again Traveler, there is no road
Only wakes in the sea.
(Machado, 1929)
My life is a journey. Embrace it. I am alive in journey, adventure.

I am alive.
Chapter 12: The So What

[Nicol is seated on the stool, this time dressed in a linen shirt, flowing skirt, and bare feet. Her hair, held in place by a beaded chopstick, is knotted in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her glasses are in her lap, and she exudes peacefulness, with an undercurrent of energy.]

**Interviewer:** *Can you describe how you see life now, your worldview?*

**Nicol:** It’s living from a place of love, of connection to Source, of sanctity of life. I am more aware of each living being now, sometimes even those unseen. The more time I spend outside the more conscious I am of the grasp, the gasp of life in each of us, and the tendons that stretch to bind us together grow stronger and more resilient.

I’m also choosing to live from a place of groundlessness and wakefulness, embracing and facing the emotions as they wash through my days. Time has slowed down, and I more consciously wield my energy, depending on what type of environment I want to create at that moment. How I wield it, and with whom, depends on all of my ways of knowing. I am learning to sense the energy around me, receive and give feelings and emotions. I am learning to use my intuition: then think about my words and body language. I’m still working on the imaging part…yes, I’m working on all of it. [She smiles gently.]
I am very conscious of the continuous flex and pull between nature and human culture, and I believe my work now is to bring these two closer together, interweaving them using my place in education, with skillful, honoring communication. Daily asking the question, “What would nature do?” remembering that I, too, am part of nature. Spending mindful time in the outdoors makes this easier and more graceful.

Someone asked me the other day how I deal with problems. I had difficulty answering that question. After thinking for a while, I described my perception of not seeing problems. I know this seems odd, especially given my other worldview of everything was a problem to be solved.

Now I’m learning to see the “problem” as an opening, an opportunity, regardless of what it is. It is, and in that situation, there are emotions, and people reacting, and we lay it all out before us, from many perspectives, and an answer emerges. “We become open to what might be possible and we’re inevitably led to the question ‘So what do we want to create?’” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 131). Then, we act.

By denoting something as a problem we create a perspective of “it’s not going my way” or “this isn’t the way it should be.” We can “develop a different relationship with our ‘problems.’ We’re no longer victims” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 131) of the problem. Now, I can dwell in a place of peace that “it is.” And that place of peace is good.

The trick is to carry this into every part of my daily “regular” life, which is embedded in a culture of analytical reductionism and separation. The key to this, I’m finding, is yet another paradox. The more time I spend in solitude in the outdoors, the more vital and paramount are the human relationships I have and nurture. When I meditate on loving-kindness, and bring this into being with each word, each touch, each
mental or heartfelt intent, it all connects us and cultivates more love. This is the power I have.

Love and power are twins, a friend of mine told me recently. Yes, yes, they are. And the interesting thing is that the more I dwell in love, the less I am desirous of power, but the more inner power I have, and the more social power is given to me in the form of positions of authority.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) said, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

Tillich (1954) defines power as the force towards self-realization, or the “drive to achieve one’s purpose, to get one’s job done, to grow” (Kahane, 2010, p. 2). Love is reconnecting that which has been separated, bringing unity from fragmentation (Kahane, 2010; Tillich, 1954). I’ve found both of these to be true, and their mutualism works best when I’m fully present in the moment, allowing the experience to weave its way through me.

I have found through this process that I have the ability to embody each and every interaction to the degree I wish. Do I always do this? No. When I catch myself flip-flopping, being washed about in the tide…[She closes her eyes and shakes her head, frowning slightly.] I have a long process ahead of me. But I can remember it’s an incredible irony, another paradox, that by relinquishing control, I can gently, peacefully, have immense control over my self and what my life is.
Interviewer: Your countenance seems more restful. You are less intense, or you seem to be less intense.

Nicol: Rest, peace, joy. Yes. There are still times I wake up grinding my teeth, jaw aching. Or I come home from a meeting with my inner weather on the verge of a hurricane. Then I slow myself down. It’s those times I’m not being present, and I usually haven’t been spending time outside.

Interviewer: If you could summarize this journey in an image?

Nicol: Ah, you’re asking that just because I need to practice this! [She laughs out loud, a deep, resounding rumble from her chest] I could summarize the outcomes in a list for you. I could try to do that, and a year ago, I probably would have. Now, I know I cannot separate them out. They are all interconnected. That is one theme, one stream running through the forest of my heart. Another tributary is love and power. Another is the journey itself—like the stream of spring runoff that comes down the mountain through the forest right now. Each section of the water’s journey is different; some parts meandering, others pounding deep bass notes through the forest as the waters leap from the precipice to the pool frothing below. Then it waits, travelling under several logs, to fall again. Where will it end up?

I don’t know. That is another part of this beautiful paradox I am learning to treasure daily. I find amusement in it. I am okay with not knowing. I am actually relieved that I don’t have to know. I don’t have to worry about tomorrow, as it will take care of itself. My only requirement is to be here, now. Be present. [She smiles.] I guess I am getting better at images.

Interviewer: I’d like to take you back to something you wrote in December.
DECEMBER 31

“I doubt that I would have been able to see, far less understand and appreciate, the experience in others if I had not had the experience myself” (Anderson, 2000, p. 5). The complexity of my life involves the continual balancing of various roles and responsibilities: I am a parent, a wife, an educator by profession and a member of a small rural community. In all of these roles, a central challenge and responsibility is to understand and communicate the act of learning in a thorough and clear manner. Personally, I have a responsibility to understand myself, how I view the world, and how I relate to others. “What is education if not an intense, probing scrutiny of moral choices and dilemmas” (Bochner, 1997, p. 18)?

As I proceed along this journey, I hope to gain a better understanding of embodied cognition, heuristic and intuitive inquiry, phenomenology, and storytelling. In addition, I hope to develop a greater understanding of the process of transformation, especially in light of the adaptation required during climate change. The cumulative effect of these experiences may create an opportunity to assist others who need or desire to take such a journey in the future.

As an educational leader in the public education system, I am hopeful that I can participate in or initiate emerging opportunities to enhance
environmental learning. I believe that many educational choices are motivated by logical rationalization of “we should be doing this.” My failure to successfully implement UNESCO’s challenge of a decade of sustainable development has spurred me to integrate different ways of knowing and head and heart. I enter the classroom again next fall, and desire to continue UNESCO’s decade with a clearer understanding of sustainable development, at a personal level. I also hope to develop meaningful action through a new worldview that is integrated and inclusive.

Through these experiences, I hope to invite greater understanding for both teachers and learners in the educational community of unity within our selves, with others, and with our environment.

I also hope others will experience resonance when they read my thesis, which may then encourage them to explore their own connections (and disconnections) to knowing, learning, and how they relate to themselves, to others and to the natural world.

**Nicol:** Hmm. I remember writing this, and feeling anxious about all my “hopes”. One aspect I’ve uncovered is my love of story. “Think[ing] with a story is to experience its affecting one’s own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one’s life” (Frank, 1997, p. 23). Going through these experiences, and then crafting them as a story has been a truly fulfilling experience again. I’ve discovered that words are my friends; that I enjoy them when I need them. And I don’t always need them.
I find the worldview aspect of this humorous. I was bound and determined to develop a new worldview. And in a sense, I guess I have—that I’m not convinced a formal worldview is necessary. Such an overarching conceptualization of life can be a place of refuge, a place of boundaries or constraints that may be comforting, but at other times, it may be too restrictive. Perhaps it’s that my new worldview is more adaptive. Sometimes connections through my soul are enough, and I don’t need to construct or convince myself that “I believe this” or “I believe that.” It is enough that we are all here together. Meadows and Wright (2008) wrote of transcending paradigms. Perhaps this is a glimpse of that.

**Interviewer:** *As you go forward, how do you think your experiences will help with climate change?*

**Nicol:** I believe the process of presencing will allow me to adapt with the earth as it adapts. And perhaps I can joyfully, lovingly share and co-create in the emerging future, even though we don’t know what it will look like.

Also, using presencing and other mindfulness practices allows me to develop compassion and empathy for people who don’t yet know how to skillfully adapt, who don’t know how to connect to their Source, to other people, to nature. I think this may be one of the most powerful parts of all, these skills that I will continue to learn to use on a daily basis.

**Interviewer:** *As we near the end of this crystallization, can you bring this full circle to where you began?*

**Nicol:** It began with wondering, “what happens when people reflect and spend time outside? Does it actually make a difference in environmental behavior?” My
synthesis after seven months of doing so is, yes, it does. But it also does something else. It changes how we see ourselves, and how we are in the world.

The most potent seeds of cultural renaissance come from the uniquely creative work of authentic adults. All such adults are true artists, visionaries, and leaders, whether they live and work quietly in small arenas, such as families, farms and classrooms, or very publicly on grand stages. (Plotkin, 2008, p. 8)

Where am I to lead, where is my story? It’s everywhere I go, in every relationship I have. My story right now is in education. How do I know this? It doesn’t come from an analytical decision. My gut, my heart, my intuition is telling me, and leading me. I’m using my intelligence, and opportunities are opening to co-create, in love and power. When I “expand [my] own awareness…accept [my] own adequacy and legitimacy, and follow [my] own desire to live in love and participation…all the rest will flow” (Maturana & Bunnell, 1999, p. 10). And this is what is happening. The doors are opening, just as I saw in the vision weeks ago.

Does this mean I communicate perfectly, always compassionate, with just the right word? Hardly. I still have control and force patterns in my language, in my body. But I am increasingly aware of them. I notice the urge to control and gently remind myself about controlling the efforts to control. I remind myself and shift my constraint and boundaries that enable power-to (Kahane, 2010), in love. This is in direct contrast to control, or power-over my self or others.

Regardless of the action or position, everything can be in a place where there is love. “This is what sustains the complex and dynamic positivity system that forges your
often inexplicable ties to family, friends, and community. Love energizes this whole system and sets it into motion” (Fredrickson, 2012).

**Interviewer:** You spoke of this earlier, love.

**Nicol:** Yes. [She nods.] We need to live in that tension between love and power, not fear and control. This has interesting implications, especially as I look back on where I started this journey, and even how I designed it.

I chose a personal lived experience study for several reasons, one being out of fear. To study other people means you have to get close to them, to interact with them, and ask them questions. It becomes an intimate act requiring empathy, depth, and compassion. When I began this process, I did not have the confidence that I knew how to have empathy and compassion. Now, I have increasing confidence and know-how. I daily see the effects of resonance circuits, empathy, and compassion in my relationships. This is a further irony, that out of solitude and personal inquiry, I have learned how to communicate and connect with others.

I also chose a personal lived experience study because I’d previously lived my life making generalizations and then applying them to my self. “This is the pattern I observe, therefore it must be correct.” Apply said pattern, and see effect.

This can be a useful ability, but it can also have disastrous consequences, such as destroying diversity and eliminating creativity, especially when undertaken in isolation and fear. Standardization and conformity increase efficiency, but they may remove the ability to flex and adapt. We are all different, at different places in our journeys. Honoring these differences is essential for recreating our culture and adapting as the Earth adapts.
The ability to generalize is an important aspect of the scientific positivist paradigm (Heron & Reason, 1997). While worthwhile in scientific discovery and sometimes useful in personal life, to exist exclusively in this state of consciousness is a lonely existence. Generalization also breaks down when events out of our immediate control occur, events such as climate change, increasing social divides or economic collapse. When we generalize in these situations, we lose our stories. When we lose our stories; we lose our connections to each other. We are isolated, and in our isolation, fear begets fear.

If we live in isolation and fear of these types of events and situations, we begin to seek more control over our own little kingdoms; we put the blinders on, and hope to hell nothing worse happens. The problem is that of course worse things do often happen, and our lives continue to get smaller and smaller, as does our very self (Hanson, 2009).

And we know it. But it takes an enormous amount of courage, and maybe some desperation, to face these fears. This is where the actual experience of connection building, presencing, and moving at a pace that we are personally able to sustain is imperative to create change at the paradigm level. It must be personal, for each and every one of us. We must tell our stories.

If I know personally what it is like to experience trust and belonging, then the path becomes clearer. And then I can share it.

This is the purpose of my story. I offer it as a kind of road map that may be useful for other people seeking connections. My process involved crystallization, and this story is just that; a moment crystallized on paper, within which others may perhaps see parts of themselves and their journey refracted.
Epilogue: A Path

Awakening is not a process of building ourselves up, but a process of letting go.

It’s a process of relaxing in the middle—the paradoxical, ambiguous middle, full of potential, full of new ways of thinking and seeing—with absolutely no money-back guarantee of what will happen next. (Chodron, 2012, p. 62)

~

It’s been almost a year in this odyssey. So much has changed, not the least of all, me. Professionally, I will be a vice-principal at a local secondary school next fall, working to develop a new way of delivering secondary education with a basis in natural literacy, worldviews, and human development—beyond academic achievement, rooted in who we are as people on a journey of transformation. It will be a challenge to work at a site where people may or may not be ready to explore this path. While I anticipate potential conflict and fear, perhaps with patience, compassion, and love we will be able to create some opportunities for change. Returning to work in a building run by bells and schedules, I have wonderings about incorporating outside time, mediation and
mindfulness into my daily pattern. Another challenge will be to be present and bring that presence to my new workplace.

Our farmhouse renovation is almost complete, and my husband Hans will continue on in his journey of self-realization, especially as I have completed this portion of my own. It will be my turn to support him in his journey, just as he has supported me. I anticipate more letting go of my expectations as he uncovers his path. Once again, I don’t know what it will look like.

I’m confident the friendships and other relationships begun through work and community engagement will continue to blossom. I will nurture them, as I continue to nurture my own journey of being present. Will I be able to interweave them? Help to bring community back into school experiences? I hope so.

And what of UNESCO and implementing sustainability initiatives in the classroom? While such initiatives and policy are valuable, I now see that environmental education can go much deeper. As Donella Meadows (2008) writes, the most powerful way to intervene in a system is at the paradigm level. The Earth is changing, and we are part of that system. Mere policy, initiatives, numbers and information flows are not enough at this juncture. We need personal stories and personal connections; a transformation of who we experience ourselves to be, not just changes in what we do.

Hence, my story. I was curious and so initiated this thesis process to intervene in my own system. I believe it’s been a fruitful intervention. I am more curious than ever. I will bring that curiosity and what I’ve learned with others into the BC public education system.
[She stands up from the stool, loosens her hair so it flows down her back. 

She walks to the door and looks back.] 

I’m going outside now. Will you join me?
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