DISCOVERING MY STORIES: A NARRATIVE OF A MATRIOTIC MOTHER IN NATURE

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The truth about stories is, that’s all we are

– Thomas King
Abstract

Now, seemingly more than ever, we are facing actual and impending consequences of climate change. The health of the non-human world and of our own species depends on our ability to develop a new story: one that is intergenerational and captures the essence of a humanity that respects the interconnectedness of all life on planet Earth.

Using the environmental autobiography process, I rediscovered personal stories from my childhood of time spent in nature. Each story became a unique insight into a current concept or theory in the environmental field, what I called *environmental connective (t)issues (ECT)*. I found that through reminiscence and an examination of the learning we experienced as a child, we find insight into the truths we know as adults. Our stories, if we offer them to our children, can help forge strong ties to each other and to our natural world.
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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that in order to achieve this milestone and to further my environmental pursuits and passions, I had to fly across Canada – from Ontario to British
Columbia – three times. The irony in this is not lost on me and I feel that Mother Earth is owed special recognition for the role she played in absorbing part of this burden.
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Chapter 1: Prologue

During the summer of 2013, on the quiet but intellectually vigorous Royal Roads University campus grounds, I participated in a short medicinal plant walk with a Coast Salish Elder of the local Salish peoples of Vancouver Island. As an introduction to my fellow cohort and myself, this Elder told a story about his youth. He was the only child in his village to go to a residential school. At school, he would be bullied and beaten because he was an Indian. Back on the reserve, he would be bullied and beaten because he attended a white person school. “Now I do not tell you this story to have you pity me”, he told us, “this story is simply a part of who I am and, as a newcomer to this group, I wanted to share a piece of myself with you”.

Whenever I think of that moment, I feel reminded of the value of grace and openness. Sharing that story with us was a simple and brief gesture but one that has greatly impacted and stayed with me. The story that was part of him is now also part of me. The threads of the stories we tell weave complex webs and amount to fascinating connections. Perhaps so do the stories we do not tell; those deeper pieces of ourselves stored away that shine through our actions rather than our words. Narrative inquiry involves working with people’s consciously told stories, recognizing that these rest on deeper stories of which people are often unaware. Stories are a way to make sense of our world and to attempt to share that understanding with others (Hart, 2002, p. 140). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) tell us: “A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (p. 4).

This past May, my husband and I welcomed our firstborn, beautiful baby girl Evelyn Jane into the world. Throughout the pregnancy (much like all women expecting their first child, I would imagine) I tried to prepare myself for the upcoming and sudden changes to my life. I was
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(of course) fully aware that my fondness for sleeping was soon to be sorely tested. I knew that personal and free time would have a new sweetness to it. And amidst feelings of lopsidedness and discomfort, I tried to imagine the impregnable bond that I would soon share with a little being that I would grow from my own body (although none of my daydreaming over this could ever compare to the real thing). But when Evelyn arrived I soon came to realize that she had inspired a change that I had not anticipated. She has inspired me to write for her. She has inspired me to reflect and to write down some of my stories so that I might embed a piece of myself into her future narrative. I have chosen to pursue this by following the *environmental autobiography* process explained by Helphand (1978):

a process that encourages inquiry into the “personal history [of someone, and] includes the environment as a major actor in the cast of characters. It is also a process which has been used… as an exercise for putting people in touch with their childhood memories of places. (p. 7)

**Organization of the thesis project**

There are two distinct pieces that comprise this thesis work. The first piece is the autoethnographical book that I have written entitled *From One Outdoor Child*. The book is written for my daughter Evelyn, although I hope that others will want to read it too. The book will be published and made available digitally¹ and in print copy². The book introduces the personal impetus that inspired me to write stories pertaining to my connection with nature as a child and speaks briefly to the rationale of using storywriting as a tool to communicate with my

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¹ Visit http://oneoutdoorchild.weebly.com for more information.
² Inquirers may email the author at [email protected] to learn how to access a print copy.
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daughter. My stories, which make up the main body of the book, have been organized according to how they reflect different concepts within the field of environmental education and communication; into what I have called *environmental connective t(issues) (ECT)*. Each section of stories is then concluded with a short analysis of that ECT concept; basically they are brief literature reviews. The book concludes with a fictional recounting of the day that I give my book of stories to my daughter to read.

The second piece is this paper, which is meant as an accompanying academic support to the book. This paper houses the building blocks that both allowed for the book to be written and analyzed in an educational manner. Here I discuss the contextual framework that shaped my decision to undertake a Master’s in Environmental Education and Communication and to write a non-traditional thesis; delve into the literature related to intergenerational storytelling, autoethnography and narrative research endeavours; reflect on the writing experience; and discuss the value of my work and its possible contributions to the practical and academic world.

I chose to divide my thesis into two formats in order to pay homage to my narratives in the traditional book setting. I also wanted the book to stand on its own without the logistical – but necessary – elements that my thesis requires for official accession into the academic world. Below you will find two arguments to help frame the context of the stories I selected to include in my environmental autoethnography: one titled, “The grand narrative” and the other, “The little but great narrative”. It is my hope that they help place the reader in a similar mindset to my own in order to impress upon them the same urgency to action that has propelled this thesis endeavour.
The grand narrative.

Stories. Listen. Listen. Stories go around in circles, they don’t go in straight lines, so it helps if you listen in circles. Because there are stories inside stories, stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of finding is the getting lost. And when you get lost, you really start to look around, and listen –from the Traveling Jewish Theatre

In 1988, the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The panel was put in place to evaluate the current science and state of knowledge regarding climate change worldwide (Cubasch et al., 2013). Many individuals around the globe continue to question the severity, or in fact the very existence, of climate change, but it is quite real and the message from the IPCC is clear:

The climate is changing across our planet, largely as a result of human activities [and] climate change, whether driven by natural or human forcing, can lead to changes in the likelihood of the occurrence or strength of extreme weather and climate events or both.

(Cubasch et al., 2013, p. 121)

For many of us who have heard this message, the determination to find solutions for mitigation and adaptation has been strong; we can, and we must, do better. The health of the non-human world and of our own species depends on our ability to change our current mindset and practices. Yet amidst the struggle and hope for change is a discussion ripe with sadness, frustration, reproach, despair, and anger – how did we get here? How did we let it get this bad?

What kind of world are we leaving behind for our children?

With extreme trends towards urbanization, rapid and senseless consumption, and a population heavily reliant and focused on technology (Suzuki & McConnell, 2002), members of
the industrialized societies have gradually disconnected themselves from an intimate knowledge and experience of the natural world. This disconnection is affecting human health (Louv, 2005) and, as discussed, the health of our planet (IPCC, 2013). I fear that the current storyline of the industrialized world is doing all of us a disservice when it comes to preparing for the challenges of increasing climate change impacts. Future generations who, with time, become more and more distanced from the stories of our ancestors, rely more heavily on the status quo. But among other things, modern, mainstream society has warmed to a separation from nature that fulfills a need for instant gratification – a dangerous juxtaposition to the realities of the natural world.

Many years ago, Leopold (1966) wrote of this dangerous separation of man from nature: “There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace” (p. 6). I have witnessed a result of this disconnect myself many times during tree identification walks. As part of our discussion, I have asked young students a simple question – *where do (wooden) hockey sticks and baseball bats come from?* Sadly, and too often, the answer is: “the sports store”. My little story about the hockey stick question might seem trivial, yet is an important observation into the kinds of narratives that we perpetuate through our everyday actions. In my opinion, a story that leaves out the part where nature fits into our lives is the story that ultimately perpetuates the more damaging narratives that dominate Western culture (at the very least), such as man’s inherent dominion over nature. As William Cronon (1992) says: “bad story-telling has wreaked havoc with the balance of nature” (p. 1361). I think we are all a little guilty of some bad storytelling. We need only look to “nature deficit disorder”, a term coined by Richard Louv (2005), to grasp the severity of where our shared story is headed. Welcome to a world of
individuals that spend more time observing and mimicking simulations of life on a screen than observing and participating in life naturally outdoors.

As you might guess, this narrative is a shared narrative of culture and society. It is a grounding point from where my personal narrative – the little but great narrative described in the next section – takes shape. It helps to frame the larger picture and help the reader place this thesis work within the realm of environmental education and communication. Some days it might not seem relevant or pervasive enough. Some days we might choose denial over worry or hope. But whether we are actively involved or not with the current environmental degradation and climate changes that threaten many aspects of our current way of life, they are there. And it is very personal. The threat of large-scale, knowable and unknowable environmental changes and crises is personal. The bundle of emotions I juggle every day because I worry about things like pesticides/insecticides, water wars, fracking, oil spills, overconsumption, loss of community, mass extinction, etc. is personal. The tenuous future my daughter will be part of is personal. The value I now place in certain experiences and spaces because of the threat to their very existence in the future is personal. From this perspective, both the grand and little but great narratives are, in some fashion, my story. As much as they are separate threads, they are threads woven from the same material.

The little but great narrative.

_Storytelling at its best is mutual creation. Through the stories themselves and through the interaction between teller and listener, traditional storytelling goes beyond the surface child to speak to the inner child, to recreate and nurture the human spirit._ – Augusta Baker

The environmental movement demands action, both in the now and in the future. To tackle an environmental challenge as overwhelming as climate change, Thomashow (2002)
emphasizes that each of us must “build a foundation of knowledge to which [we] can always return” (p. 78) as a way to ground ourselves. I believe that children and parents must be part of that process. If the next generations lack the essential bond with the natural world that allows them to foster respect for and place value in the natural world, then we have failed in creating a foundation that will last – one, as mentioned above, to which we can always return. We have a responsibility to be better ecological citizens, teachers, and role models for the sake of our children and for ourselves. Unchecked in our “progress”, the planet and all of its inhabitants (both human and non-human) will endure further suffering from our cultural pressures. Ultimately, the answer to our problems is not simple. Climate change will not be abated or reversed simply because we all start getting outside more often and experiencing nature more deeply. However, I am a firm believer in the “start somewhere” philosophy and simply by looking at the research and my own life experiences, I know that saving the outdoor child is a critical starting point:

Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature. (Louv, 2005, p. 159)

As an environmentalist, an educator, and a mother, I have come to recognize that my own story within nature is powerful and is an important part of the foundation from which both Evelyn and I can grow and learn. Ultimately, I feel that the first step towards raising an individual that respects the interconnectedness of all life is to better connect with my own such
understandings, my own love for nature and to capture this reflective experience in story. I must first discover myself:

To understand oneself and others, we need to understand our own histories and how we have come to be what we are. We make our own history but not under conditions of our own choosing, and we need to understand these conditions of action more, if our future making of our own history is to produce outcomes closer to our intentions and projects. (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2002, p. 7)

Like many things in life, change often comes at the expense of something we plan for. My thesis journey is an excellent example of this: full of stops and starts due to my pregnancy and subsequent months with a newborn, as well as the inevitable decision to alter my thesis focus (a direct result of my new role as a mother). But my current situation as a new mother, one where I am quite literally discovering the world all over again with my baby daughter, provided a wonderful opportunity to take a close look at the stories my husband and I will tell her, including stories of our own pasts. These stories will be one of the first she will know and will greatly influence her understanding of the grander narrative. Evelyn will grow up to learn the stories of Mother Earth and Mother Nature. These stories are part of the culture she will know, due in part to the values of our family but also due to the values of so many among the expanding environmental movement in the Western world. She will, hopefully, be part of a future where we do better at embracing a lifestyle that nurtures a positive and sustainable relationship to this Mother. But before she learns of this great Mother of nature, I have hope that she will learn of her own mother so that she may first come to relate to, understand, and place value in what it is to be an (ordinary) mother in nature. Through this storywriting experience I
hope to show her (and also to remind myself) that there is the extraordinary in the ordinary: “The
taking of experience and attending to it and pondering it and putting it into a form means
inevitably that we are taking a past, and taking a past that we agree – within ourselves or with
others – has consequence” (Myerhoff, 2007, p. 18).

Each day – each ordinary day – time taps away at the keys as my little but great narrative
unfolds. This narrative is a personal one. It is about me. These days it is about a mother. It
chronicles the precious relationships that I have with others, with Evelyn, with the earth, with my
Mother (nature), with myself. But this personal narrative is bound within a larger volume of
work, that of the grand narrative. At work within this grand narrative, one of social-cultural
roots, are many busy hands; each one flipping through its pages, adding side notes, re-writing
sections, and even erasing. The grand narrative has many different ideas about what a
relationship with children should be like. What a relationship with the earth and Mother Nature
should be like. Culture is like that. As I said before, it’s all kinds of personal – for all of us.

A Story of Identity

In undertaking this thesis project, I have invested quite a bit of time unpacking my
thoughts about my own identity. My new role as a mother has obviously greatly impacted the
development and final product of this thesis: the expectation that my daughter would be the
primary audience for the book of stories is an obvious example of this. Motherhood is often seen
as a catalyst for inspiring change in self and/or society (Anaruk, 2009; Citron-Fink, 2013;
Skenazy, 2015), particularly when it comes to protecting children and the world they live in. It
can even be the stepping-stone to activism (Citron-Fink, 2015; Helphand, 1978; Tucker, 2005).
In their work, Logsdon-Conradsen and Allred (2010) suggested that this link between new
activism and motherhood – what they call “environmental mother-activism” or ENVIMA – is worthy of further study to evaluate possible contributions to social movements. Although I think it could be argued that I was active in the social/environmental issues before I became a mother, I have experienced a heightened drive in my motivations since my daughter’s birth. Thus, it is possible that my work contributes to the further study suggested by their work. However, their discussion about ENVIMAs did not deliberate on the role that the foundational identity of a new mother (thus a woman’s values, behavior, and so on before having a child) can play in conditioning their likelihood of becoming actively engaged in environmental issues. “The primary goal [of environmental autobiography] is increased self-knowledge and awareness. This includes an understanding, sensitivity and respect for each individual’s environmental history; and the opportunity to explore the relationship between the environment and individual growth and development” (Helphand, 1978, p. 9). Framed this way, I think environmental autobiography/autoethnography projects are a valuable narrative tool that can be used to explore this particular gap in environmental activism in mothers, as well as, the environmental history of all environmental educators.

In the environmental movement, motherhood is often praised and glorified through the use of phrases or titles like “‘mothering’ nature” and “Mother Nature”. As an example, “one of the central metaphors of the ecofeminist movement is the use of motherhood to characterize women's unique capacity to care for and nurture the Earth” (Stearney, 1994, p. 145). But, argues Stearney, this maternal archetype “characterizes women's supposed instinct for caretaking and nurturance as essentially a natural phenomenon, and encompasses the female psychological aptitude for limitless love and self-sacrifice” (p. 147). This implication both reinforces
traditional interpretations of the role and character of women but also distances men from traits that are often associated with protecting or caring for the earth: “positioning women as environmental "mothers," but making no mention of environmental "fathers," or even of environmental "parents" (Stearney, 1994, p. 156). I do not intend to delve further into the charged waters of ecofeminism and the general use of maternal archetypes here, but having had many important eco-conscious figures in my life that were male, I felt a need to touch on this important discussion.

Interestingly, in 2002 (Bell, 2002) introduced the word “matriotism” (now there is a word that radiates in my soul with warmth and fire)! In her article, she tells us that she wanted to find a way to describe how she felt about her world and her values that was beyond the common patriarchal schema (common, at least, in the western world). Matriotism, of course, is a play on the word patriotism but she stresses that the two are not necessarily analogous. Her intention was not to introduce matriotism as a replacement for patriotism, but rather to “[bring] our matriotism a little more to the forefront” (p. 24). So what then is a matriot? “A matriot is one who loves and loyally or zealously supports her motherland, her own planet – Mother Earth” (p. 24). Although the term matriotism stems from the word matriarch and alludes to the “selfless devotion” (Stearney, 1994, p. 147) perspective that arguably simplifies the notion of motherhood, I feel it nonetheless encourages a non-gender attitude: anyone can be a patriot, much like anyone can be a matriot. I self-identify as a matriot and I believe that certain elements of my childhood were integral in fostering a deep love for Mother Earth. Now, as a mother, my sense of matriotism is even stronger and through this exercise in reflection (my thesis endeavour) I am reconnecting with the places and people who helped create this critical part of my identity.
Notwithstanding the misgivings and hesitancies I have had throughout this journey – will Evelyn (or others) even be interested to know my stories? Do my stories really have anything important to say? Have I experienced “enough” at this age to warrant sharing my stories? – I trusted that something would fall onto the page and I was rewarded with a book of stories of which I am quite proud. Besides, I feel some validation in knowing that it is, in fact, “incorrect to assume that life reflective processes begin to occur only in old age” (Staudinger, 2001, p. 152).

As a mother, I have a unique relationship with my child. Because of this I have the unique opportunity and the unique responsibility to contribute in whatever way I can to forming a new narrative for my daughter’s generation. As Ochs and Capps (1996) tell us: “Dominating stories that preserve the status quo can estrange and muffle alternative perspectives” (p. 33) and our children are in dire need of the latter. Besides, as Thomas King wrote ever so bluntly of himself and a fellow writer: “we wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hope that they would” (King, 2010, p. 92). Yes, sir! As a matriotic mother who wants to offer a world of wonder, exploration, beauty, and imagination, I share in that hope.

Why story?

_We each must decide what calls us to stories - Bochner, 2001_

The collection of stories in this work will go on to create impact in whatever way the reader so chooses, but my ambition for this work is threefold; firstly, I hope that it will become a treasure hold of memories for my daughter Evelyn; secondly, I hope that it will be full of inspiring sentiments, values, and goals to guide and teach, ideally across generations; and thirdly,
I hope that it serves as a useful example of environmental autobiography/autoethnography and invigorates discussion for its possible use in the field of environmental education and communication.

I chose to use story and storywriting for several reasons. First of all, “stories are accepted as effective means for teaching others” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 680). They have long been appreciated for their ability to pass on values, goals, and hopes from one generation to the next. As Ochs and Capps (1996) illustrate: “…the lines of work on modes of thought, story structure, and autobiographical memories have come to share a central assumption: that personal narratives and stories are intimately related to needs, wants, and goals” (p. 679). Secondly, storysharing – whether through oral storytelling or written accounts – offers the opportunity to come to know oneself, as much as it is a way to share that self with others (Hart, 2002). This introspection is foundational to recognizing and embracing the authenticity that comes from our everyday experiences. Bochner (2001) refers to his work with self narrative “a journey toward narrative authenticity” (p. 151) and reminds us:

> When I ask, then, “Who am I?” What should I do? What story do I want to be a part of or be remembered by? I am asking, “What choices do I have?” My authenticity is not a claim to originality or uniqueness but to responsibility, choice, and vigilance.

Such authenticity is integral to the ongoing fluctuation of our identities as an environmentalist, educator, mother, or whatever else our identity may be.

Thirdly, I find that personal conviction urges me toward an autoethnographic research journey because much like long-time mystery novel writer P.D. James quipped “Maybe, maybe it would be a good thing to leave, at least, some personal record of my life” (Stinson, 2014,
As a contribution to my field of research, a trove of my childhood memories in nature becomes one more piece of the puzzle: “Memories about significant life experiences provide the longest range glimpse into lifespan learning that the field of environmental education currently enjoys” (Chawla, 2006c, p. 361). And as part of my wish that this work becomes a keepsake for my daughter, Helphand (1978) believes that exercises in environmental autobiography “contribute to an open atmosphere and multigenerational interaction” (p. 9). I am thrilled that I can provide a glimpse at her first immersions in nature, as an infant. When considering the important role that intergenerational storytelling plays, passing on memories that we likely cannot access as adults is precious, and as Chawla (2007) muses, is possibly more important for our lasting connection to nature than we realize:

How much all of us may be formed by our first experiences of the world that precede the acquisition of language and conscious memory, including the cues we receive from those who first carry us outside into the world in their arms, showing us by their example what to notice, how to notice it, and how to respond. (Chawla, 2007, p. 162)

I believe that storytelling and storywriting will have an important and unique contribution to the future of research in the environmental education field. I envision an academic world where stories will become integral to social science research. They will, in the words of Bochner (2001), be more than “just another source of data” (p. 134). The movement towards narrative research will represent an important shift away from facts and master narratives and towards embracing meaning and local stories (Bochner, 2001). The lived experience is rich with personality and complexity; quite simply, it is data worth examining and narrative inquiry is a research methodology that allows us to do that just that (Clandinin, 2006). Experiences cannot
be fully interpreted without recognizing the messiness, the emotions, and the impartiality of those involved and therein lays the advantage and strength of storytelling. We are all experiencing scary and powerful ramifications of current and impending climate change and we are all dealing with the messiness and the emotions flooding in their wake. We are trying to make sense of what we feel, see, and hear because we have a human need for making sense of things. I argue that environmental autobiography work can help us make sense of these emotions and establish the kind of connectivity we desire and need to find collective solutions. As Helphand (1978) once said: “I see Environmental Autobiography as one way of acting in that process of increasing awareness of the individual and self, to a sense of connectedness to larger communities of family, community, society, culture and species” (p. 11).

The time for impersonal, removed, fact-based arguments and data collection within the environmental movement is coming to a turning point. Lertzman (2012), during her research, found that information gathered from traditional polling techniques (perhaps a more traditional and accepted method of inquiry) is often not reflective of the deep, conflicting emotions that many people are feeling about climate change and the environment. She determined this by speaking with the people involved in the poll directly. Those people she spoke with may not have any idea of the impact they had on her research but their stories and the emotions each of them shared matter, even though “there is frequently an assumption that [ ] stories must be positive and hopeful if they are to succeed and that famous people are necessary to make the point” (Randall, 2009, p. 126). But more than ever I am encouraged that reflecting on my past, and the places and people in it, is an exercise that brings me closer to writing myself (and my daughter) into a different narrative; one of my choosing.
Addressing critiques of narrative research

Like all forms of research, there has been considerable debate about the value of narrative research. Polkinghorne (2007) argues that beginning in the 1970s the world of social science became divided into two camps – those who stuck with the traditional consensus of what constitutes evidence and valid inquiry and those who were reformed into believing that “there are important aspects of the personal and social realms that cannot be investigated within the limitations of what has been conventionally accepted… to justify or validate knowledge claims” (p. 472). Today, there remains a healthy exchange of opinions about the inquiry methods of social science reformists, a group that includes narrative researchers. Please note that the following is not intended to be an exhaustive review of the questions raised in favour or against narrative style research, but rather an informative glimpse into the more persistent arguments.

For some critics of narrative-style research, like Atkinson and Silverman (1997), personal narratives and autobiographical accounts are deemed sentimental and seriously under criticized by many qualitative researchers. For them “sociologists are supposed to be story analysts and not storytellers” (Bochner, 2001, p. 133). Atkinson (1997) describes narrative research as being preoccupied with “confession” and “therapeutic discourse” (p. 327). He is not alone in his critique, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) point out one of the most common critiques heard against narrative research is “if you are a storyteller rather than a story analyst then your goal becomes therapeutic rather than analytic” (p. 745). Yet for reformists, narrativization, or the act of narrating, is more than therapeutic relief as it allows researchers to be more open to the process of writing. The inquiry process may appear guided by a topic or end goal, but there is more going on under the surface that will be revealed throughout and upon reflection (Conle, 1999).
The very act of approaching inquiry differently than traditional quantitative methods is what makes narrative research and the discussion it fosters so appealing. Of course, this is also what produces considerable debate about the validity of the work.

Narrative researchers must recognize that the question of validity stems from a traditional need to understand, for example, the reliability or generalizability of generated data. These kinds of objective criteria are traditionally used to navigate issues of quality (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000 as cited in Hart, 2002, p. 149). For some, the integration and recognition of self in the narrative research process is exactly what creates an absence of reliability and truth within the data. It establishes, for certain critics, the inability to trust in the research process and serves to underscore the idea that “narrative is inevitably a tale, a tale that is always potentially a tall tale, since there are no scientifically sanctioned empirical procedures for verifying its storied form” (Kreiswirth, 2000, p. 312). It is perhaps most crucial to remember when critiquing narrative research that it is a style not focused on presenting and arguing for an absolute truth. Ultimately, this means we cannot expect quality assessment criteria that were developed to assess absolute truths to be appropriate tools to assess narrative research. As Hart (2002) tells us, “there is no one right way to do research. There is no one right way to assess it” (p. 154).

It is said that there are many ways to read a book and, in the world of research, there are also many ways to define a word. The root of the word “valid” is valere, which by definition is that “which means to be well, strong, powerful, or effective and to have worth or value” (Angen, 2000, p. 392). Yet these days, our common understanding of the word is more along the lines of a “positivist objective truth” (p. 392). This modern understanding of the term “valid” is culturally imposed and quite confining as it ultimately leaves out important elements of the
word’s true meaning., We can and should be more aware of what it is we are really saying when we expect “valid research”. Perhaps it is time to restore the true meaning of valid, a meaning that is “more… a subjective, human estimation of what it means to have done something well, having made an effort that is worthy of trust and written up convincingly” (p. 392). Through her work, Chawla (2006c) has found that “research about significant life experiences explores memories of the most reliable kind…[when] people… engage in unconstrained recall about past experiences of personal importance, with a focus on general facts about major periods of their life” (p. 364 [emphasis added]). In this respect, autobiographical memory exercises can greatly contribute to producing memory utility, which according to Neisser (a cognitive psychologist interested in autobiographical memory work), is the most important role of memory (as cited in Chawla, 2006c). Chawla summarizes his idea of utility with this: “As we move through our lives, what matters most to us are not precise details about the past, but how we interpret and use the past in meeting the challenges of the present and in anticipating the future” (p. 364 [emphasis added]). The issue of truth or validity then becomes “similar to the distinction between asking whether a particular memory is ‘true to the facts’ or ‘true to character’ (Chawla, 2006c, p. 364). Polkinghorne (2007) would likely agree since he feels that validity within narrative research is attainable by assessing how well the collected narratives articulate the original intention of the storyteller. Through this lens, perhaps narrative research could be weighed by its validity – in the qualitative research domain - after all. Although I fear the contention surrounding questions of reliability in narrative research will not soon be resolved, the current debate does force some perspective into the issue of objectivity and the limitations of all kinds of research.
Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) believe that “self-study”, a term they use to identify different kinds of narrative research including autobiography, becomes research “when biography and history are joined, when the issue confronted by the self is shown to have relationship to and bearing on the context and ethos of a time” (p. 15). In an effort to pave the way for greater achievement of quality narrative work, they developed a set of nine guidelines to follow. Their suggestions are clear, comprehensive and stay true to the intentions of qualitative narrative research. I present those guidelines here and will revisit them later in this paper:

1. Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection;
2. Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation;
3. Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand;
4. Biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator;
5. Authentic voice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the scholarly standing of a biographical self-study;
6. The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situation not only for the self but for the others;
7. Powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action: Something genuine is at stake in the story;
8. Quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in context or setting;
9. Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths.

It is my belief that qualitative narrative research can navigate the tension between intellect and emotion, and will continue to reshape academic discourse. My work contributes to this process and will become “part of a postmodern scholarly process [where there is] awareness of one’s story and the ability to reflect on how it impacts one’s choices of issues and lenses, and the ways in which one hears [others’] narratives” (Bresler, 2006, p. 28). With each new broadened mind, the academic world begins to embrace uncertainty, which, in my view, will serve to strengthen many future endeavours both in the academic and non-academic world. As Angen (2000) says:

What we require is an interpretive approach to social inquiry that will enlarge and deepen our understanding of what it means to be human in this more-than-human realm. To do this is to risk certainty, but this loss is mitigated by what we stand to gain in moral and practical relevance” (Angen, 2000, p. 380).

**Story and Environmental Education**

I believe that being informed – using our cognitive reasoning – is but a starting point in the act of educating. I know in my heart that there is great importance in integrating more of our true selves into life and conversation, even if it is at the forfeit of intellect: “the point is that knowing and being encompass more than information and empirical knowledge” (Allen, 1975, p. 3). As Davis (1998) puts it: “Thinking about the environment is just not expansive enough to embrace the broad range of ecological and social concerns that we are now facing” (p. 120).
In 1975, an instructional activity guide was developed and authored by Allen for teachers in regards to environmental education. The document “investigates the role of storytelling as illustrative of human values and as an appropriate medium for environmental education” (p. 1). Allen identifies two objectives to support his theory about storytelling in environmental education. The first illustrates how storytelling “involves creating personal awareness of the story dimension of life” (p. 6) and how “this demands that [we] make [our] story conscious to [ourselves] and, for environmental education, to be conscious of the impact of [our] story on the way [we] act toward, and interact with, other life in [our] biotic community” (p. 6). The second objective illustrates the importance of empathy and how we each must develop “empathy for others stories and ways by becoming conscious of them and by reflection” (p. 6). As I have already discussed, and as Allen (1975) points out, the educational value of storytelling is not that it offers an ultimate truth but that it serves to lead us towards developing this empathy and perspective; empathy and perspective that are solid starting points to help guide future generations towards embracing matriotism and become major members of the paradigm shift that Capra (1996) believes is paramount to effecting positive change in our world.

**Intergenerational Self**

Autobiography work greatly contributes to identity development. Autobiography begins to define the self with the:

Realization that one has a unique set of memories and a unique perspective for understanding and evaluating these memories that makes one a unique self, and it is this subjective perspective that links these experiences together to form a coherent sense of self from the past into the present. (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008, p. 133)
But as an exercise in reminiscence, autobiography is for the self and for others, including others across time. Those who partake in sharing stories from time past, for instance family stories, build upon the foundation of intergenerational identity formation: “In a very real sense, the achievement of an autobiographical memory system sets the stage for the intergenerational transmission of family and cultural history, which is the bedrock of human culture” (Nelson & Fivush, 2004, p. 506).

Fivush et al. (2008) define the intergenerational self as: “a self embedded in a larger familial history” (p. 140). They argue that children who are raised in an intergenerational context, who know their family history, gain strength and security from it. Even stories that they did not experience themselves “provide powerful models, frameworks, and perspectives for understanding [their] own experiences” (Fivush et al., 2008, p. 131). By sharing intergenerational stories, we are essentially celebrating the particular, ordinary lives that touch our own. Brooks (2012) believes in the “tremendous power of particularity” (Brooks, 2012, para. 12). He writes: “If your identity is formed by hard boundaries, if you come from a specific place, [...] if your concerns are expressed through a specific paracosm, you are going to have more depth and definition” (para. 12). Interestingly, there is substantial evidence telling us that there is power in the particular, specifically in the details of our memories: “Parents, and especially mothers, who scaffold elaborated, richly detailed narratives of the past, focusing on emotions and evaluations, have children who come to tell their own personal narratives in more embellished, emotional and evaluative ways” (Fivush, 2008, p. 54). We are bound to benefit from these kinds of experiences because as Demetrio and Borgonovi (2007) tell us: “we remember better what has impressed us and stirred our emotions” (p. 257), what has invariably
ended up in our semantic memory, a memory bank that is narratively mediated (Demetrio & Borgonovi, 2007).

**Research Objectives**

“It has been said many times that the human species is a storytelling one, ranging from grand narratives, scientific and moral truths to folklore, myth and superstition. We struggle to tell, or listen, to the right, true or correct story” (Payne, 2010, p. 305). The environmental movement is made up of many stories. You can simplify them, as humans are wont to do: destruction vs. conservation, love vs. war, economy vs. ecology, etc. but “we must eventually ask a more basic question: where did these stories come from?” (Cronon, 1992, p. 1348) so that we can “create conditions that allow [us all] to compose other stories of [ourselves], to change the stories [we] live by” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 52). As a matriotic mother I want to include my stories into the stream of plotlines and “once upon a times” that my daughter will grow up with and contribute to. Through my stories, she will come to know my bond with Mother Earth and this will “become part of her […] own history” (Fivush et al., 2008, p. 139).

The intent of my research was to undertake a search to re-discover stories of my past (through an environmental autobiography exercise) and to capture stories of my present as I explore the potential contributing role of nature storywriting and story sharing of an “everyday” person to the field of environmental education and communication. In particular, I hoped to uncover means to broaden our understanding of what it is to cultivate ecological consciousness in ourselves and in future generations through story and to place emphasis on the role of one of the most important educators/communicators a person can have – their mother.
Research Question

1. As a matriotic mother, what is my experience of writing a collection of personal stories (intended for my daughter) of my past and present connection with nature?
Chapter 2: Methodology

A small part of me wasn’t yet present in my surroundings because I was preoccupied with the work I still needed to do. But there I was, nonetheless, sitting in a room with my peers and quite a few unknown members of the community who had joined us for the lecture. The year before, in that same room, I had attended a talk given by Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, who had Skyped in from his home in the United States. Needless to say, I was feeling like this year’s speaker had big shoes to fill. Little did I know that what I heard in the following hour was about to profoundly change the focus of my thesis work and ultimately my perspective on environmental education.

The 2013 Bateman lecture that I describe in that story was given by Cara Pike, the Chief Executive Officer for Pike Productions, an environmental communications consulting firm. Cara spent her time with us talking about the importance of story as a communication tool. I remember that at the end of her talk she was asked a question from a gentleman in the audience. He wanted to know whose stories we should be telling and she responded fervently: “the most important story you can tell is your story because it is the most authentic story you know” (C. Pike, personal communication, July 10, 2013). There is such incredible power in this simple statement and, in my autoethnographic research, I have found that her faith in the every day life lived is shared by others. Connelly and Clandinin (1990), for example, write: “stories function as arguments in which we learn something essentially human by understanding an actual life or community as lived” (p. 8). The stories of “actual life lived” are also powerful guiding tools for
future generations and I believe such stories are an important entry point into effecting positive change within the environmental movement.

Before delving further into the details of my thesis journey, I will lay out some conceptual definitions of foundational terms from my work as either I have interpreted them or that have been appropriated from other research.

**Story and narrative.**

For the purpose of this work, “story” is a lived experience. Stories are used to describe personal experience (or the lived experience of self) and to describe the experience of the collective (of self and others) (Allen, 1975). Often stories take a common form that exhibits the classic “w”s: who, what, when, where, and why. They are considered here to be descriptions or explanations of an event with a clear boundary. Narrative, for our purposes, is a collection of such stories. Let me use the metaphor of a garden to help explain. The crops within a garden plot are entities within themselves, even though some might grow tall and overshadow others or find common ground and touch. They are the stories. The garden bed, on the other hand, which houses the soil matrix that sustains the life of the crops – in essence keeps everything going – is the narrative. Crops (stories) might be removed from the garden bed (narrative) and the look and feel of the garden may change with time, but regardless, the garden ultimately remains a garden.

Individuals make sense of their lives through a reliance on familiar plot lines, archetypal characters, and significant remembered episodes. They use these components of the life story to weave together diverse experiences into a coherent narrative that create a sense of unity over time and a defined purpose for future action. (Singer & Bluck, 2001, p. 93)
Narrative inquiry.

In line with my interpretation of narrative, I am working from the general understanding that “narrative researchers… study… stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). Narrative inquiry studies the storied experiences, narrated by voice or by action, through “listening, observing, living alongside another, writing and interpreting texts” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 46).

A mother.

As I have mentioned, the role I now have as a mother has been a strong catalyst for this autoethnographic storywriting inspiration. As such, I would like to place specific emphasis on what I feel is a “mother”, even though I also feel that summarizing this incredible role into a few words seems ridiculous and impossible. For the sake of this work, a mother is all at once a parent, a role model, a teacher, a communicator, a friend, an individual, and a woman. Interestingly, as I considered what words to include in my definition of “mother” (and I do stress that this is my own definition), I felt an urge to include words like inspirational, warrior, pillar of strength, wise woman, protector, and environmentalist: In fact, if there was ever a time to include an etcetera with a definition this might be it.

An Environmental Autoethnographic Journey

I believe that an important step to becoming an effective communicator is authenticity: “Becoming an authentic teacher depends on understanding our Self” (Cranton, 2001, p.16). But I had to learn my own story before I could tell it to others. It was through this journey of self and discovery of purpose that I found ways to reflect on and repair disconnect between knowing I have an important story to tell and understanding what that story is. My work is a reflection of
myself: a self that wants to be recognized: “Creating an autobiography, in this sense, means not
only leaving a written evidence of our story, but also asking others to become interested in what
we have experienced through the exercise of writing” (Demetrio & Borgonovi, 2007, p. 253).

Autoethnography is an approach that demands the giving of oneself and the recognition
and attention of self within society and culture for it is a “self-narrative that critiques the
situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710). Data collection and
analysis undertaken in an autoethnographic study is usually entirely researcher-dependent. In
fact, as Spry (2001) points out, “in autoethnographic methods, the researcher is the
epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (p. 711).
However, Helphand (1978) points out that to discover one’s environmental history, a goal of
environmental autobiography, the writer must be open to accessing external resources such as
conversation and imagery; what he refers to as “social phenomenology” (p. 7). My work is an
exercise in environmental autobiography, although as contribution to a larger community of
environmental educators and mothers, I argue that it is more of an autoethnography. As
aforementioned, “an environmental autobiography is a personal history which includes the
environment as a major actor in the cast of characters” (p. 7) intended to “increase self-
knowledge and awareness” (p. 9).

The process.

Using Clandinin’s (2006) description of narrative inquiry as a baseline, my narrative
journey is based within the “writing” component. Although I wrote my own experiences (and
not someone else’s) into story, there was still space for listening, observing, and interpreting. I
wrote both stories of past and present, a natural outcome of storytelling, autobiography and
“picturing” (which I interpreted to include studying and taking photographs), according to Connelly and Clandinin (1990). To revive my past memories, I reminisced with family and friends, reread childhood journals, combed through old photo albums, and “jotted” my thoughts constantly. Following guidelines to writing a life story developed by Stow (2001), I did not try to write everything I could think of, but instead selected “those events and feelings important to [me], the writer…that have lodged in [my] memory and have made [me] the person I [am]” (p. 4). I began writing a list of names of important people from my past and of places that I especially remembered. I then, as outlined by Stow (2001), sorted them and began deciding which storylines to follow and which to leave out. I did not write my stories in any particular chronological order but I did try to start and finish a particular story before moving onto a different one. I did not “verify” any details with family or friends that were part of the memory but instead left the process of recollection as organic and intrapersonal as possible. A story is always evolving and the process through which it is remembered is all part of the restorying aspect of storywriting and living. As Clandinin and Connelly (1989) tell us: “deliberately storying and restorying one's life (or a group or cultural story) is… a fundamental method of personal (and social) growth: it is a fundamental quality of education” (p.2).

To capture my present experiences (those in nature with Evelyn), I wrote my thoughts in a journal as soon as I could after our excursion (basically when she was down for a nap), took photographs to stimulate my thoughts, and practiced active listening/observation. In fact, active listening/observation was important for the entire project because I needed to be intentional about the process of reliving my stories through conversation and reflection. I wrote the stories of Evelyn and I from a first person perspective, meaning that although I did describe her
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reactions, I did not intentionally claim to know or imagine what she was getting out of the experience.

The story elements of the book were written and completed before I began the process of selecting the *environmental connective issues* (a step described below). This ordering of events is important to the story analysis process because, in this way, the ECTs would truly represent the learning I had as a child. An alternative method might have been to come up with a list of environmental concepts, values, or viewpoints that I adhere to now as an adult and then select childhood stories that best exemplified them. I chose the former approach so that I could contribute to the body of knowledge examining the significance of childhood as a critical time for positive environmental identity formation. In using this approach, therefore, I did not know ahead of time which environmental theories or concepts (or how many for that matter) would become part of my research, and ultimately my book. This is not an uncommon practice in narrative inquiry research: as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have said, one must “be prepared to follow their nose and, after the fact, reconnect their narrative inquiry” (p.7).

Childhood photographs collected from family albums and/or drawings from my youth accompany most of my stories. In the e-book format, I was also able to include a Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) video clip that captures a special memory from a summer in Nova Scotia as a child (my parents had the old VHS tape digitized for me). The book became what Helphand (1978) described as “an image bank of childhood environments” (p. 7) and, in its final format, reflects his interpretation of an environmental autobiography project where the narrative base can be expanded “to a presentation which can be narrative, graphic, or multi-media in format” (p. 8).
Selecting environmental connective t(issues).

As part of the academic rigour expected of this thesis, I pried into the “meaning” of my stories to help the reader identify underlying narratives, values, connections, and themes as they pertain to the environmental education and communication field. I then searched out previously described academic concepts that would best exemplify these meanings and embedded miniature literature reviews of each into sections 1-8 of the book. In their role as accompanying pieces to my stories, I called these select concepts environmental connective t(issues) (ECTs):

Much like connective tissues support and connect other tissues or organs in our bodies, the environmental issues identified in this book connect to and support both other environmental issues and my stories. From this perspective, they perform the role of what I am glibly calling environmental connective (t)issues (ECTs). (Gray, 2015 [excerpt from From One Outdoor Child])

The ECT concepts covered in my book include (starting from Section 1):

1. Sensory exploration
2. Shifting baselines
3. Ecological self
4. Significant “others”
5. Unstructured play
6. The “magic” in nature
7. Significant places and spaces
8. Environmental education
Although I do firmly believe that it is not necessary to make what Baumeister and Newman (1994) call “propositional inferences” in order to validate personal story, for the sake of emphasizing a direct link to current research, I opted to do so in this case. In a sense, I chose to forfeit the option to let my stories speak for themselves. In doing this, I have essentially generalized the meaning or moral of my stories. But by articulating my own interpretations of the stories I have provided a starting point – a foundation – from where new narratives can be created: “Such generalizations”, write Baumeister and Newman (1994), “become a useful resource for interpreting subsequent events, because […] general principles and broad assumptions provide useful frameworks for making future stories” (p. 679). As part of reflective research, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) refer to the idea of “‘giving back’ to each other [as teachers and/or researchers] ways of seeing our stories” (p. 9). Providing one way that others might see my stories is exactly what I have done.
Chapter 3: The Many Facets of Experience

Take an interest in the concrete details of life; don’t bury them under psychiatric jargon. Think of the life being expressed not merely as data to be analyzed and categorized but as a story to be respected and engaged - Arthur P. Bochner

The Childhood Factor

In her study, Thompson (2008) identified something she called the childhood factor. In examining what factors most affected the likelihood that an adult would access an outdoor place regularly, she found that frequency of childhood experiences in such places was the best predicting variable; other variables included age, gender, level of employment, distance of outdoor site from home, and the possibility of a special connection to green spaces through family, work, or volunteering.

Childhood is, as a systems theorist would say, an example of an entry point that can be used to effect change. It is a time in each of our lives when we can adapt our identity to include elements beyond our inner self; when we are capable of forming long-lasting bonds and deep understandings of our connections to these “others” (both human and non-human, living and non-living). It is a time when we, as educators and parents, can model a respectful and attentive connection to the natural world and ensure that children have regular access to these natural spaces to explore. It is a time when we must encourage our children to roam freely, placing trust in their courage and capacity to imagine and wonder. In the context of a system composed of interdependent pieces where one of the main pieces - the human species - puts the system at possible risk, childhood presents itself as a vital and promising entry point.

Childhood is seen as a critical time to build many important character elements that may lead to sensitivity toward the natural world, including: sensory integration (Ayres, 1979);
relationship building with non-human animals (Sobel, 2008); and creativity (Cobb, 1959).

Although not all studies completely agree on the exact age range that best categorizes “childhood”, there is a consensus that children aged somewhere between three and twelve, who have participated in regular contact with natural areas, are more likely to develop pro-environmental behaviours (Bird, 2007; Sobel, 2001; Wells & Lekies, 2006). This “critical period” notion is well developed in the fields of animal behavior and language development” (Sobel, 2001, p. 79). Interestingly, all but one of the stories that I chose to include in this work reflect memories from within this critical period, the earliest from age five (the “Envirothon” story, a memory from my high school years, is slightly out of this range at ages 13-17). As my work shows, childhood remains an incredibly critical time in the realm of environmental education and communication.

The Reflective Experience

Polkinghorne (2007) describes the reflective function of narrative research as fulfilling the same role as the “Discussion” section of what he calls “conventional research” (p. 483), but in a less mechanical and rule derived – and thus more creative – way. I think the reminiscent aspect of this work fueled the reflective/interpretation demands of narrative research well; a part of the process that was both interesting and intimidating for me. Throughout this experience, I uncovered memories that I had long forgotten and once again befriended those that I have cherished and shared for years. Before I began writing, I had genuine worries that I would run out of stories to tell, but before too long I was having difficulty choosing which stories to leave out. I found that I was happy for the chance to write about a character like Bud Spinney, who probably has no idea who I am but who left quite a profound impression on me as a child. My
memories of Nova Scotia are incredibly important to me and his name fell onto the page so naturally when I was writing my stories about the Abuptic Festival. There is the power of everyday people in everyday story.

Writing the book portion of this thesis was a harder task than I anticipated. Traveling through your past is not something you should do, or even can do, in a rushed time frame. As I contemplated what pieces of story would make up the book, I felt a great heaviness. I am only 28 years old but there is still so much time there. I needed to be gentle with myself so I gave myself the time to feel each memory – in my head, my stomach, and my heart – before I wrote it down and moved on to the next.

The Writing Experience

When discussing my thesis work, I was often asked to describe what I was writing about. It was never a simple question for me because the uncertainty of what would end up on the page each time I sat in front of the computer screen was all part of the process: “not all autobiographical reasoning is volitionally engaged in with an end point in mind. Instead, linkages and themes are developed by repeated thinking about and talking about one’s life events” (Singer & Bluck, 2001, p. 95). What I noticed in these conversations, as well as those had as part of the reliving/reminiscing aspect of this work, was the renewed sensation of purpose that I felt as I described the journey I was on. At the same time, I oddly felt an intense difficulty in expressing my feelings about experiencing a reconnection with my past selves. In tribute to the desire for authenticity in my work, this mélange of conviction and hesitation appears to have weaseled its way into my writing as well. In this respect, the “Call of the Loon” story comes to mind. I have never before explained why I stopped calling to the loons and when my mother
read the story she told me it made her cry. I was surprised because I thought I had written that story as honestly as I have ever known it in my heart and my original interpretation of what I had written was one that inspired a tone of sweetness and innocence. When I reread that story, knowing it had made her cry, I realized that some of what I had hoped to say did not find its way into the text. It realized it was still in me. Perhaps I still need time to finish that story and perhaps I am not ready to share it completely yet.

My autoethnographic journey did offer the space I needed to “restory [and] develop a transformative sense of agency over [my] own narrative - in effect, ‘rewrite’ an experience (Spry, 2001, p. 712). This is something that is, in effect, a primary goal for this type of research and is possible for both researcher and reader/audience (Spry, 2001). As an example, in writing the story Nellie Lake (a story that I have told innumerable times in my life), I found that I was naturally leaning toward writing the story in a hopeful and lighthearted way, which is surprising to me since I normally have the inclination to focus on the fear and drama that preludes the otherwise positive ending. But I realized, upon reflection, that in sharing it this time, I wanted my audience (my daughter) to feel the triumph of chicken rock more than anything else.

Writing an autobiographical piece is, I imagine, difficult for anyone who likens his or her “importance” to that of an every day person. I often fell into the habit of being overly critical of my own memories; telling myself they were silly, too dramatic, too personal (ironically), too normal. But knowing that my daughter will hopefully treasure the chance to know these aspects of her mother – particularly as she grows and becomes familiar with them herself – I kept on writing. She is, after all, who I am doing this for, I would think to myself. Storying is an act between the storyteller and the audience. Although he was referring specifically to oral
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Storytelling, Lewis (2011) once said: “[We] find that we are a part of another person’s story as we listen it into being” (p. 509). I think becoming absorbed in another’s words could be likened to a form of listening, for a writer is telling the page what to say. And as I put words to the page, I wrote with hope that, one day, Evelyn and I might read the stories together.

Meeting Autobiographical Self-Study Guidelines

As previously mentioned, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) created a set of nine guidelines to direct qualitative researchers toward quality self-study work. I believe that my work has followed their suggested path as is briefly discussed below:

Guideline 1: Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection.

My stories are all drawn from childhood memories, a time that each of us can relate to regardless of where or how we grew up. Childhood evokes many familiar emotions and my stories provide a safe space to reconnect with those emotions and to learn of the specific experiences of the writer. As they are honest depictions of my own memories, my “self” is laid bare and open.

Guideline 2: Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation.

Some of my stories may appear to describe the type of events that truly change who we are – those pivotal moments – more obviously than others. Nellie Lake and The Call of the Loon, for example, are both stories that address a form of tragedy, however personal or small it may seem to others. However, I think that the environmental connective t(issues) that I identified serve to remind us that there are many ways to be changed in life and a small thing like running in the mud may actually be part of a larger life pattern. My stories provide a narrative that ultimately connects the particular with the shared experience (Bullough and Pinnegar (2001)).
Guideline 3: Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.

I think this guideline is intended to remind the researcher that it is important to place oneself into the story completely and that it is not a fair work to place judgment or to stand back and “other”. It is also intended to put emphasis on the importance of being open about one’s prejudices. As I was the protagonist in each of the stories, I believe that I can say with certainty that my perspective and my experience was the focus of the work, which negates any possibility that I participated in the act of “othering” or prejudice.

Guideline 4: Biographical and autobiographical self-studies in teacher education are about the problems and issues that make someone an educator.

In this respect my stories are double-edged swords. On the one hand, they exhibit different narrative forms that work to teach a lesson or moral. For instance, The Woodpile and Pilgrim’s Progress follow the traditional format of a scene wherein we are introduced to a complication and at the end there is resolution. My stories, regardless of format, speak to important qualities such as thankfulness, respect, empathy, attentiveness, friendship, imagination, and forgiveness, all of which are critical character traits of an educator.

And on the other hand, the settings of my stories all relate to my experiences in nature, which I have then connected to environmental issues or concepts in order to impress upon the value of story to teach such concepts. As educators become more and more aware that they need to be addressing environmental concerns, the need will arise to find effective teaching tools, such as story.
Guideline 5: Authentic voice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the scholarly standing of a biographical self-study.

I would argue that having successfully followed Guidelines 1-5 my work already moves beyond a simple, honest reminiscence into my past. The overarching narrative that runs throughout my book, connecting the stories and the environmental issues I address, gives depth to the study that moves beyond personal development. As an example, the environmental connective t(issues) are a means to discovering how my stories can become stories of the collective and tools for change.

Guideline 6: The autobiographical self-study researcher has an ineluctable obligation to seek to improve the learning situation not only for the self but for the others.

My very intention with this thesis is to seek ways to improve learning about others, both human non-human. The storywriting experience that I have completed is something that I hope to share with others in my work as an environmental educator/communicator.

Guideline 7: Powerful autobiographical self-studies portray character development and include dramatic action.

This guideline confronts another element of the aesthetics of self-study. With this suggestion, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) are reminding the writer that style is important and is relevant to the audience. I believe that I have been true to my personal writing style and that the stories reflect part of my personality: something that my daughter will hopefully cherish. I also think that having chosen to write in a detailed and familiar manner, beyond the confines of
simple chronological descriptions, is better suited to a piece of work that hopes to portray the wonder of childhood.

**Guideline 8: Quality autobiographical self-studies attend carefully to persons in context or setting.**

I paid particular attention to including details that would help any reader situate himself or herself in the context of each story, including geographical information for places to which I refer.

**Guideline 9: Quality autobiographical self-studies offer fresh perspectives on established truths.**

Here is where my work really finds its purpose, for I believe that environmental autobiographical work can offer these much needed fresh perspectives on “established truths” within the environmental field. When we reencounter our childhood stories, examine the learning we experienced in an authentic, honest, and rich manner, and either tell or write them to others, we are offering insight into truths we know as adults. In environmental work, particularly when it comes to environmental education, this perspective is crucial. In the academic realm of autobiographical work, this perspective emphasizes a kind of familiarity that reinforces the positive effects of self-study work. In describing the individual profiles or “Portraits of Grief” that were featured in the New York Times immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Eakin (2004) points out that the “the homeliness, the familiarity, of this identity narrative material is deeply moving precisely because we use it to talk about ourselves every day” (p. 123). I think this is true of a lot of autobiographical work and might explain why so many of us are drawn to reading about and learning from the lives of others, even ordinary others.
As DesRoches (2011) wrote so beautifully in his thesis:

The stories we tell matter and there is a need for the telling of new stories, of listening for new myths, of seeing with new eyes for a clearer mythic vision that gives witness to a deeper more respectful, reciprocal and reverential relationship with the earth and with the universe. Finding new stories to tell about the earth is the great work of our time, and it is hopeful work. (p. 148)

Conclusion

In this age, we are facing a planetary challenge that stretches across time and touches all forms of life. Climate change is a powerful narrative wrought with ignorance, denial, guilt, negativity, and blame, but there is also innovation, community, hope, support, and conversation. Although I believe the urgency of our collective situation remains merely an undertone in the language and actions of humanity’s dominating cultures (and their narratives), there appears to be a resurfacing trend that recognizes the importance of getting our children out into nature (Clements, 2004; Louv, 2005): this is crucial for the health of our children, but is also significantly crucial for the environmental movement. As discussed in this paper and in the book From One Outdoor Child, countless studies have shown that regular contact with natural areas in childhood increases our affinity and empathy toward nature, pro-environmental knowledge and/or behaviours, and a desire to conserve and protect it (Chawla, 1998, 2006a; Cheng & Monroe, 2010; Collado & Corraliza, 2013; Ewert, Place, & Sibthorp, 2005; Kals, Schumacher, & Montada, 1999; Pyle, 2002; Thompson, 2008; Wells & Lekies, 2006). This is especially true for childhood play experiences: “The most successful outdoor play experiences usually involve the
“child’s free choice, which is self-motivated, enjoyable, and process-oriented” (Clements, 2004, p. 77).

An environmental autobiography exercise, as I discovered, is a unique tool that offers a way to tap into our own memories of when we first connected with nature. Those stories, if we offer them to our children, can help forge strong ties to each other and to our natural world. They also bring a certain “every day” authenticity into the conversation. As a mother and an educator, I know how important it is to feel personally empowered. We all have a story. We all are stories. This is why I chose to study the possible role of story as a means to changing some of our more dominating narratives. The personal story, essentially the autobiography, brings forward the particular and the special, which is critical in the field of environmental education and communication. If we must ask our children to help us change the course we are on, we need to first help them find meaning in caring for nature from a realistic perspective: “The global concept of the environment may not be as meaningful to most people as specific entities within the environment” (Vining, 2003, p. 96). We must tell them where and when our own connection with nature was born. We must believe in the power of our stories and in the simple power of the backyard climbing tree, ditch, or creek.

What I had not foreseen at the start of this thesis journey was to discover that this storywriting process is serviceable as a workshop for teachers and parents. Although not specifically addressed as a “how-to” exercise in my thesis work, the journey lends itself to an easy retrofit for such an endeavour. If it were embraced as a piece of curriculum, I could see it being applied in many different arenas, including: regular classrooms, nursing homes, retirement communities, early years centres/early development centres, and regular and additional
As you can tell from my book, I have been actively molding my identity to reflect my passions and my values (of which love and respect for my motherland is a big part) since I was quite young. As a lover of nature I have been labeled many things in my life. Tree hugger. Environmentalist. Hippie. I don’t really mind any of them. I find each label has meaning that I can and do connect with. After all, just this morning, I hugged the spruce in my front yard. Yet I have always known that the connection I have to the environmental movement, to nature, to Mother Earth is deep and moves far beyond common labels. I am proud and honoured to call myself a matriot. And, in no uncertain terms, I am also proud and honoured to call myself a mother. A matriotic mother. I may be at the end of this thesis journey, but I will continue to tell my stories for as long as I live. If I can give one thing to my daughter, it will be a lasting impression of my unending love for and fascination of the spectacular planet we live on. My stories do not end here. My moments will keep coming up. And I will keep telling her.

We have such a brief opportunity to pass on to our children our love for this Earth, and to tell our stories. These are the moments when the world is made whole. In my children's memories, the adventures we've had together in nature will always exist. (Louv, 2005, p. 316)

**Experiencing and Interpreting Limitations**

In the realm of qualitative research, an autobiographic/autoethnographic research approach places an onus of authenticity and truthfulness on the researcher. To establish some kind of position of influence in academia, it is expected that the data (the narrative) is truthful in
intent, meaning it reflects the researcher’s original intention (Polkinghorne, 2007). But when memory work is involved, there must be some recognition that there are obvious constraints on our cognitive ability to access past memories, particularly when it comes to memories from our infancy (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Chawla (2007) reminds us that “people bring to their encounters with the world their histories, memories, and ‘residues of relationships,’ beginning most formatively with their bonds with parents and other primary caregivers” (p. 159). She points out that these so-called “residues” might even originate from a time before we consciously remember what relationship, memory, or history they are associated with (Chawla, 1998). The implication then is that a narrative autobiography may not be able to access the whole truth of a person’s history, and any resulting conclusions about causality or effect related to childhood factors may, in fact, not be fully accurate due to these memory constraints. Thus, research that seems to show cause and effect between time spent in nature as a child and pro-environmental behavior as an adult, as my research does, should recognize the role that pre-conscious memory experiences may play: “Is spending time in natural areas in middle childhood or adolescence, for example, a cause or an effect of an appreciation for the natural world? A preference for natural environments could conceivably be learned in early childhood, before conscious memories begin” (Chawla, 1998, p. 20). Ewert et al. (2005) bring to our attention a similar perspective through their findings that “while outdoor education and recreation programs can be effective in modifying environmental beliefs, individuals often bring with them a set of pre-existing environmental beliefs and attitudes that were formed earlier in life” (p. 234). Although they do not specify how much earlier in life, the thought is there. Although not addressed in my book, I did contemplate what kind of influence my time spent in nature as an infant – which according to
my parents was often – might have had in developing the “right kind” of foundation to foster such preferences in my childhood. I know in my heart, if not in my mind, that my tutelage as an outdoor child began long before my first conscious memory. Yet I maintain that this unknown element of memory does not discredit the impact of those that are remembered. Throughout our lives, we draw from what we know and, as Chawla (2007) says: “The fact that people identify special places and people in childhood as key reasons for their dedication to the environment – that they interpret these memories in this way and draw motivation from them – is important in itself (p. 148).

Beyond the limitations of narrative research, I also recognize that through my identification as a matriotic mother, I have inferred that this particular part of my identity is integral to my work and my findings. This is perhaps narrowing and possibly creates barriers for attempts at comparative categorization in future research that seeks to examine issues related to identity.

I also recognize that my work contributes to the growing body of knowledge centered on the childhood influences of those who do self-identify as pro-environmental, rather than offering investigation into “sources of indifference, fear, or destructiveness toward the natural environment” (Chawla, 1998, p. 20), an area that Chawla notes is sorely missing in the research. But I contend that my work, as an example of environmental autoethnography, demonstrates the depth and value of this exercise and, as such, can be useful for educational purposes. The stories in the book, as well as the story of the book (how it came to be), serve as tools for future curriculum that may access those very sources that she mentions.
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DISCOVERING MY STORIES: A NARRATIVE OF A MATRIOTIC MOTHER IN NATURE


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**Appendix A**

**Facilitating an environmental autobiographical experience**

*To make an impact, our audience wants to know who we are, first and foremost*  
— Annette Simmons

There are many stories to tell. I, for one, would like to tell you the story of how I (a twenty-eight year old) came to be writing an article about autobiographical experiences. In 2012, I began my Master’s in Environmental Education and Communication journey at Royal Roads University. The wonderful and brilliant Elin Kelsey taught my first course. As our first assignment, she invited us to write our environmental autobiographies of hope. This was my first introduction to the concept of environmental autobiography. Embracing the spirit of autobiography, Elin let each of us interpret the intention of the exercise. Here is an excerpt from my writing:
It is often said that children have an innate sense of innocence and acceptance. Perhaps it is for this reason that children are drawn to the outdoors and to the wonder of discovery: spending hours whirling, splashing, imitating and listening. Their senses tell them: “You are home” and they accept that with their whole being. I have faith that we, as adults, still remember this sensation. If we could only find the right key, this memory would serve as a powerful reminder that people become engraved with the values, senses, and experiences they surround themselves in and that the natural environments they visited as kids will always feel like home.

The wild, natural spaces with which I connected most as a child were quite out of my reach, but it was through incredible insight and love that my parents made those opportunities for exploration and growth happen. Looking back, I am filled with an understanding that, had they done things differently, I would likely not be the person I am today. For example, had we not trekked back to Nellie Lake after a near-drowning scare when I was seven, I might not have ever braved swimming again. For this, I owe a debt of gratitude to one very ordinary rock beneath the waves that my brother officially dubbed “Chicken Rock”.

I once saw a man, in the place where the tide had been only hours before, delicately balancing large rocks on point. Sometimes, I feel like the rocks; precarious and rickety on my perch, resigned to the eventuality of the waves, but solid and firm whether under water or dry. At other times, I feel like the man; patient and steadfast, sure that there is a point to what I am doing, even if I am one of few who understands. I think, for this is how I felt too, that when you first see the man with the rocks, you are an intruder. You feel unsure and embarrassed for him, perhaps even a desire to judge, for what could he possibly be accomplishing? But then you come
to realize that you and the others that are watching have become part of the moment; you are
drawn in and wish for something – anything – to happen. It is at this point that you feel a part of
something and if someone would only speak up and tell you what you can do to help, then you
would. In that moment, you understand that the rocks can only truly balance if everyone helps. I
have hope that humankind is capable of taking notice of each other in this way. When we are
focused together it is easier to realize that the inevitable tide is not something to languish or
fear. It is, rather, a graceful, flowing force that can inspire us to shape things for the better.

With this assignment, I was already on the path toward writing a book of my stories for
my thesis, even though I did not realize it then. In actuality, my Master’s thesis project idea
slowly took shape over a period of time when I was pregnant and later when I was enjoying the
first few months with my newborn daughter. My research into story brought me insight into the
worlds of intergenerational storytelling, identity, and childhood. As I wrote, I reflected on the
role of storytelling and storysharing in the field of environmental education and communication
and I came to believe one very important thing: there is a point to sharing our stories and I must
speak out about it. As Chartier and Lapointe (2007) have said: “One might make a good
argument that storytelling is as fundamental to leadership as hotdogs are to baseball. It is
memory, it is connection, it is essence and it is perhaps even ... soul” (p. 22).

Facilitating an environmental autobiography exercise is something that can be done with
people of all ages. In fact, I believe that it is never too early and never too late. The idea is to
inspire your audience to find one or more stories from their childhood that reflects an important
connection they had to their childhood environment; likely to a certain space, place, or person.
Once they have done this, you can then help learn to see a connection between their own
environmental history and important elements of the environmental field. Finding this
connection allows each person to value their own knowledge and their own story as part of the
greater narrative of our world: placing them in a positive position of power in regards to
changing that narrative.

Although the environmental autobiography process should be as organic as possible, you
might consider laying out a few simple steps to help organize their thoughts. As an example, I
began by asking myself two questions. The first: “What stories do I want to tell?” and the
second: “Who do I want to tell them to?” Over the next several days, I jotted down any name or
word that popped into my head, without any judgment about why it popped into my head. I then
arranged those words into categories, like “canoe trips” and “Nova Scotia”: the categories
inevitably became the jumping point from where I followed a particular memory onto the page.
As part of my thesis work, it was important that I did not try to analyze the point of the story
before I wrote it. So instead, I simply wrote each story as my memory served. It wasn’t until I
had finished writing the narrative component of my thesis that I realized how interwoven my
own stories were with mainstream concepts of the environmental movement or research field.
For instance, I wrote a story about my fondness for the cemetery that I played in as a child,
describing it as a place to escape to for biking and daydreaming. As an environmental educator
and as a parent, I am quite aware of the current movement stressing the importance of play. The
message for some individuals and organizations is quite clear: we must get kids back outdoors
and give them time to play ("Children & Nature Network," 2015; Hewes, 2006; Louv, 2005;
"Participaction: Let's get moving," 2015). Yet knowing that my own history is connected to that
message and that I can contribute my own authentic voice – my own little story – to that greater narrative is empowering.

Whether we choose to share our stories with family, friends, students, or a wider audience, the important part is that we do share them. We must reinvest in our connection to story. The environmental autobiography is a tool that we should embrace to enhance our collective story, to enhance self-narrative, and to enhance ecological consciousness.