CLIMATE CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE OUT: CULTIVATING A PERSPECTIVE OF BELONGING

By

KIMBERLY JEAN WALLACE

B.A., University of Alberta, 1995
B.Ed., Queen’s University, 2006

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

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

Dr. Frank R. Kull, Thesis Supervisor

Dr. Liza Ireland, Thesis Committee Member
School of Environment and Sustainability

Ms. Michael-Anne Noble, Director
School of Environment and Sustainability

ROYAL ROADS UNIVERSITY

December 2012
© Kimberly Jean Wallace, 2012
Abstract of the Project

Environmental issues, such as climate change, may be exacerbated by humans’ habitual reactions to stress and discomfort. This thesis describes how a practice of mindfulness, an illumination of held assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of beliefs of belonging, can influence our responses and positively affect relationships with self and others – human and other-than-human. Three areas of study in this research include: (a) the history of several dominant assumptions in Western culture; (b) the practice of mindfulness; and (c) neuroscience. Using an integrated methodology, I drew from hermeneutic phenomenology, and organic and intuitive inquiries to conduct a personal and a co-operative inquiry with a small group of adults in Jasper, Alberta. Several methods of inquiry include a practice of mindfulness; journaling; and other arts-based practices. My findings suggest that mindful meditation is a helpful, often overlooked, tool that can assist us to work toward healthy ecosystems from the inside out.
Dedications

I dedicate this work to

the Athabasca River,

who continues to flow,

and

the trees,

who teach me to be present, even with discomfort.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge,

My co-participants, for openly sharing their experiences and wisdom with the circle. I am so grateful for your dedication to yourselves and to the community.

My thesis supervisor Dr. Frank (Bob) Kull, for his patience, humour, guidance, honesty, and humanness. Thank you for sharing your invaluable time and many gifts with me.

My friends and family, for cheering me on, sharing their homes, and participating in meaningful discussions with me. Thank you for joining the adventure.

My partner prior to and during this adventure, Dave, for his love and support. I am truly grateful.

The MAEEC 2010 cohort, a thriving community of radical beings. Thank you for your radiance, humour, love, and integrity.

Dr. Rick Kool, for his commitment to the MAEEC program and to the realization of his dreams. I am in awe of your light and enthusiasm.

My students and their parents, past and future. Thank you for offering me such rich opportunities to grow, to heal, and to share. I love you.

My teachers, past, present, and future, human and other-than-human. I am deeply grateful for your communications with me.

All sentient Beings everywhere. May we be healthy and joyful. May we be free from suffering. May we embrace our wildness. May we be well.
There can be only one permanent revolution—a moral one; the regeneration of the inner man.

How is this revolution to take place? Nobody knows how it will take place in humanity, but every man feels it clearly in himself. And yet in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself. (Tolstoy, 1900, p. 29)
## Table of Contents

Abstract of the Project .................................................................................................................... 2
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... 4
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ 6
Chapter One: Introduction .............................................................................................................. 8  
  Background ................................................................................................................................. 8
  The Rational .............................................................................................................................. 12
  Research Questions: What Am I Looking For? ........................................................................ 14
  Framework ................................................................................................................................ 15
  Delimitations and Limitations ................................................................................................... 15
  Implications and Significance ................................................................................................... 16
  Researcher’s Perspective. .......................................................................................................... 17
  Thesis Overview ........................................................................................................................ 24
Chapter Two: Literature Review & Scholarly Context ................................................................ 25  
  The Present: Mindfulness .......................................................................................................... 26
  The Past: Exploring the Roots of Personal and Cultural Assumptions ..................................... 31
  The Future: Neuroscience ......................................................................................................... 42
  Chapter Summary ...................................................................................................................... 46
Chapter Three: Methodologies and Research Design ................................................................... 48  
  Rationale for Chosen Methodologies ........................................................................................ 48
    Hermeneutic phenomenology. ............................................................................................... 48
    Organic inquiry. ..................................................................................................................... 50
    Intuitive inquiry. .................................................................................................................... 51
    Cooperative inquiry. .............................................................................................................. 52
    Circle council. ........................................................................................................................ 52
    Integral theory. ....................................................................................................................... 53
  Rationale for Research Design .................................................................................................. 53
  Research Procedure ................................................................................................................... 61
    Text study. ............................................................................................................................. 61
    Personal study....................................................................................................................... 62
    Community of practice. ......................................................................................................... 66
Chapter One: Introduction

This is a project of love. What I’ve presented is a snapshot of the experiences and insights I’ve gained throughout the research process. This is part of an offering I make to the community as I continue to learn about my place in the world, and how and where I can best serve our shared home, the Earth.

Background

Unhappiness is polluting not only [our] own inner being and those around [us] but also the collective human psyche of which [we] are an inseparable part. The pollution of the planet is only an outward reflection of an inner psychic pollution.
(Tolle, 1999, p. 67)

As an environmental educator and communicator, I’ve become curious about the various influences of and barriers to the messages I send and receive, especially those concerning the fundamental place of humans in the world. It seems that our experiences, including those of communication, are filtered through the assumptions and beliefs we hold. These experiences can then influence our relationships with self and others, both human and other-than-human.

As a point of clarification, I understand an assumption to be a proposition that is frequently “unchallenged, unquestioned, unexamined, and very often untrue” (Beaumont, 2009), while a belief follows a consideration for and an investigation of multiple perspectives. A belief can still be false. Further, evolving circumstances may alter the relevance of a belief. I understand that assumptions and beliefs act as filters for our experiences of the inner and outer landscapes.

Our assumptions are often formed without our conscious awareness. They may arise following our own experiences, or be taught to us by family, culture, or media. Assumptions
seem to thrive when we take our ability for conscious and intentional reflection for granted and simply accept the stories we hear or experience as the entire truth. However, when we learn to habitually question and explore the underlying assumptions and beliefs that significantly influence our behaviour, we may find ourselves in a strategic position to create intentional and lasting change. Our ability to respond, rather than react, to the world is strengthened through this questioning, and we begin to create new stories.

After investing much time and energy in efforts for a healthy and just planet, I began to wonder about the underlying assumptions and beliefs that drive my efforts, as well as those of my colleagues in the field of environmental education and communication. Do the Earth and its other creatures need or want our help? Within complex, living systems, how can I know when my actions are the most appropriate? Who do I become in relation to those I attempt to assist, and those whose behaviours I attempt to alter? What do I endeavour to gain or avoid through my efforts, and what are my motivations?

Perhaps most mystifying to me is why, despite my efforts to work for the health of the external environment, I know so little about my inner space. While I have worked to reduce my impact on the planet’s ecosystems, why is it that I often overlook my own ecosystem, the balance of my mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health? It is my thesis that our inner climate, including our assumptions and beliefs, influences our work and interactions with the world. This inner space is as important – if not more so for its ability to colour our experiences – as the other matters we typically address in the field of environmental education.

**Inner climate change.**

Increasingly intrigued by how my inner and outer environments – separated only by my porous skin – intricately influence one another, I became interested in the health of my inner
climate. I grew curious to investigate what it is to pay attention, not just to the visible realm of my actions but also to what Scharmer (2009) calls the “blind spot...the inner place from which [I] operate” (p. 7). As Tolle (1999) suggests in the opening quote of this section, by tending to and balancing my inner climate, is it feasible that I might also influence the external climate?

This inquiry is rooted in a curiosity about how we, as conscious and self-aware humans, might increase our capacity for creative decision-making, especially during times of change and instability. At this time in humanity’s evolution, when our species is faced with circumstances as life-altering as global climate change, I sense we would benefit from the illumination and unpacking of the default assumptions and beliefs that influence our behaviours in the world.

Stressors, especially those that are life-threatening, often trigger a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. Though we most often rely on what has worked for us in the past, living systems evolve so that reactions based on previous circumstances are not always relevant in the present. I propose that by working with the climate of our inner landscape, we can cultivate our ability to respond rather than react, and thus influence our external behaviour and relationships, and possibly our environmental conditions. Conversely, if we don't address interiority, any attempts to change the outer world may fail or certainly be less effective.

Pain.

Throughout my life, I have invested significant time and energy to reduce the experience of pain, a sensation I’ve assumed has no place in the world. More often than not, the pain I sense occurs in my mind. I imagine the pain of others, or the potential for my pain, and I seek to alleviate it. Sometimes, it’s a painful event or situation that I imagine doesn’t belong, such as conflict, debt slavery, animal cruelty, or climate change. Other times, the pain comes from a belief that another person doesn’t belong, often someone I’m in conflict with or whose values
differ from my own. Of course, the pain also arises when I ponder my own shortcomings and imagined lack of belonging. I’m not smart enough, disciplined enough, attractive enough, creative enough, green enough, fit enough, prosperous enough, peaceful enough, or patient enough. As a result of this pain, I react in multiple ways. I may cry out for help, blame others, attempt to change something or someone, or numb myself to the perpetually arising ache of discomfort. For the most part, I am overtaken by default reactions to pain.

Virtually none of my efforts to eradicate the persistence of pain or discomfort in my life have been successful, at least not in the long term. In fact, many of my attempts lead to further complications. I’ve discovered that my resistance to pain, as well my assumptions about it and its triggers, are intimately linked with an experience of suffering. According to Buddhist philosophy, pain is the first “dart of existence.” “As long as you live and love, some of those darts will come your way” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 50). Suffering, however, arises from the second darts that we throw in reaction to life’s inevitable discomforts (Hanson & Mendius, 2009), and is triggered by our assumptions and beliefs about pain or its triggers.

Though perhaps counter-intuitive, it seems that my attention and energy need not always be placed on changing or fixing that which activates my discomfort or experience of pain. Rather, I might focus on transforming or unfixing my assumptions and beliefs about these stimuli, or about pain itself. I might do well to invest in a regular examination of my inner landscape, including my response to what life offers me. This is especially true when I feel life’s gifts are unpleasant.

Rather than immediately protest against or flee when I experience conflict with what is, I wonder how I might benefit from learning to be present with the various discomforts that arise? If we cannot eliminate all pain from our lives, how might we learn to be with it, at least for a wee
bit longer than we’re used to? How might curiosity, instead of judgement, help us to respond creatively, rather than react to the triggers of pain? What might we unearth should we relax into and explore our assumptions and beliefs about the triggers of our discomfort? Is it possible that both I and the triggers of my pain, or the pain itself, belong in the same moment? I have a sense that many undiscovered experiences exist just beyond the realm of my typical reactions.

**Mindfulness.**

The practice of mindfulness involves bringing one’s non-judgemental awareness and to the here and now. It can help to illuminate the “blind spot.” Though I began to dabble in mindfulness over a decade ago, I was reintroduced to the practice in the winter of 2010-2011, during a graduate course of my Master’s program. Dr. Frank (Bob) Kull, the course instructor – also the Academic Supervisor for this thesis – invited our class to practice mindfulness as a part of learning about systems theories.

Bob’s invitation arrived at an opportune time. I was metaphorically drowning in my role as a public school teacher. Mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, I was doing all I could to stay afloat. As I found myself sinking beneath the increasing discomfort of conflict in my job, Bob’s invite served as a rescue device. I grabbed on and slowly pulled myself to safer shores where I discovered the foundations for this thesis.

**The Rational**

A lack of inner awareness is a weakness for many of today’s change makers (Scharmer, 2009, 2010). Our deep-seated, often unconscious assumptions and beliefs not only affect our ability to communicate clearly, but they can also impact our relationships, credibility, and thus our capacity to influence an audience. When we neglect the internal space from whence we operate, our interactions with the world are apt to become susceptible to incongruencies.
The impact of an intended communication can be all but lost when a communicator’s explicit and implicit messages lack congruency due to a lack of inner awareness. Examples include sustainability conference organizers who hold events at expensive wilderness resorts; educators who fly around the world to educate others about how carbon emissions increase global warming; organizers who decorate International Women’s Day events with flowers farmed by women without proper access to food and water; rights activists and anti-corporatists who smoke big industry cigarettes made with tobacco farmed by families locked into debt slavery; and labour unionists who offer thank you gifts of chocolate made from cocoa beans hand-picked by children. I offer these examples not to criticize those who make honorable efforts but to demonstrate the importance of being aware of one’s inherent assumptions and beliefs, both of which influence our actions in the world.

Some assumptions and beliefs are passed on down the generations of a culture, often embedded in the structures of language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2004). The members within a culture are frequently unaware of the impact these patterns have on their behaviour. In our culture, the effectiveness of guilt, shame, and fear in behaviour control is an entrenched belief that is not always valid. Though these methods may be effective with people who are heavily dominated and controlled in one way or another, they don’t work well when motivating people to act freely. Cognitive scientists have demonstrated that chronic stress, such as that induced by the threat of impending planetary doom, limits our capacity to learn and solve problems creatively (Sylwester, 1994). However, and despite the evidence, guilt, shame, and fear continue to be used in environmental education and communication campaigns as a way to alter behaviour (i.e. Fidgetwith, 2010).
However, the use of scare tactics can come across as manipulative propaganda. In an attempt to control behaviour with threats, we may actually evoke “an emotion of distrust [that] leads to a search for certainty and control, which in turn leads to a desire to appropriate everything – blindly oblivious to what this manner of living brings with it” (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997, p. 2). The irony is that when environmental educators communicate from a dysfunctional belief in the effectiveness of guilt, shame, and fear, we may actually reinforce the harmful behaviours that we seek to change.

**Research Questions: What Am I Looking For?**

Because I’m curious about my own blind spot(s), I wondered how a practice of mindfulness, an illumination of current assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of beliefs of belonging might influence the ways in which I relate with the world. Through a personal study and then with six co-participants, I explored how a mindful practice can condition us to remain present, and assist us to become aware of and modify the assumptions and beliefs that influence our behaviour, and thus our relationships. My primary research question was:

- How does the practice of remaining mindfully present, even with discomfort, influence my relationships with self and others, both human and other-than-human?

The two secondary questions were:

- How does the practice of illuminating and investigating my assumptions and beliefs influence my relationships with self and others, both human and other-than-human?
- How does the practice of fostering my beliefs of belonging influence my relationships with self and others, both human and other-than-human?
Framework

Because I honour multiple ways of knowing, I chose a multi-faceted approach to this qualitative research project. I’ve used an integrated and interpretive methodology that draws from hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1990), organic inquiry (Clements, Ettling, Jenett & Shields, 1998; Clements, 2002, 2004; Curry & Wells, 2006), intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2004), and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997). I describe each of these in Chapter Three.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations.

Prior to beginning, I knew each of the co-participants from the group research in some capacity. I recruited group members based on my intuition and my experiences with each of them. As I distributed invitations, I considered the group gestalt as well as each person’s capacity for the above-average investment of time, energy, reflection, and self-discipline required from this project. Following my invite, the group members self-selected and I had no need to turn anyone away from participating in the research. All of those who agreed to participate fit the job requirements (see Appendix A for the Co-Participant’s Job Description).

Because I wanted to increase the likelihood that co-participants would attend all of the weekly meetings, I reduced travel barriers. First, I chose people who lived within the community where I conducted the research. I also rented a small gathering space in a quiet, comfortable, and neutral community building at the centre of our town. It was easily accessible to all of us.

At the weekly meetings, I shared recordings of guided meditations (Kabat-Zinn, 2002), and Tonglen meditation (Chödrön, 1997). I also shared readings and poetry from several authors (see Appendix D). I chose these selections intuitively from the texts in my literature study, and
they may have influenced the direction of the group conversations as I read some aloud at the beginning of each session.

**Limitations and opportunities.**

While I perceive it as an opportunity rather than a limitation, most research, including this one, is coloured by the assumptions, beliefs, and life experiences of those who pose the questions, offer the information that is collected, as well as those who analyse and interpret this information. The methodology of this research emphasizes multiple ways of knowing and being in the world. It also honours the personal perspective of the researcher.

Due to the broad scope of the questions, the co-participants and I were unable to collect and reflect on every relevant experience. We used a variety of methods to record our experiences including journals, photography, video, drama, and drawing. While I transcribed the weekly discussions, I did not record all of the intricacies of communication that accompany speech, such as body language, facial expression, and intonation of voice.

I identified and understood the themes through my own interpretive lens. Though I verified the themes with the co-participants, I acknowledge that another person with a different worldview might interpret the data differently. I’m curious as to how another (i.e. a co-participant or someone with no connection to the study) would understand the information I gathered, and how their results would compare with mine.

Because I used an integrated, holistic approach with this research, there is no way of knowing exactly which of several methods facilitated the experiences that arose.

**Implications and Significance**

Though they influence the meanings we assign to the inner and outer landscapes, our assumptions and beliefs are not static; we can illuminate, transform, and expand them (Lipton,
I wonder what shifts in awareness we might experience at a cultural level if we became more aware of our own deep, often unconscious assumptions and beliefs, and how they shape our communication and relationships. For example, perhaps in learning to be consciously present with the sensations of discomfort rather than perpetually resist them, we might discover innovative solutions to the issues we encounter that trigger our discomfort. By accepting that pain has its place in the world, we may learn to create new cultural storylines, possibly ones that do not conclude with the anthropogenic destruction of the planet’s ecosystems. By integrating a practice of mindfulness into our environmental education and communication programs, I propose that we can experience positive and fresh outcomes. These programs may be additionally enhanced through an illumination and modification of current assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of our beliefs of belonging, both as educators and learners.

A practice of mindfulness seems to create time and space for us to examine and potentially modify the assumptions and beliefs that underlie our habitual behaviour. When we can enter into this space between our experiences and our reactions to them, a greater awareness of choice seems to arise. In this way, we are able to mindfully respond rather than habitually react to the world. Through these small yet significant inner shifts, perhaps it becomes possible to address *Climate Change from the Inside Out*.

**Researcher’s Perspective.**

I sense that I am in relationship with the world. Even more, I am of an animate Earth (Abram, 1996; Barrett, 2009) and a conscious Cosmos (de Quincey, 2002). In partnership with
the world that envelops, infuses, and is me, I co-create my experiences. I am a result of my experiences just as my experiences are a result of me (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Amongst these pages, I offer you my authentic understanding of what I have come to experience as an interpreter of the multi-verse of which I am a part. However, I offer no absolute conclusions. I invite you, the reader, to come to your own understandings. This paper is intended to spur dialogue and to pose questions rather than attempt to conclusively answer the questions it poses. The discoveries made through this research are not static; they are subject to growth and transformation, like the land and those who inhabit it.

Despite being influenced by a culture that seems to give unbalanced credence to the determinism of cause and effect science, my overall worldview is one that integrates several ways of knowing and sensing the world. While I draw from external, objective methods of truth-finding, such as direct observation and scientific studies, I also employ inner, subjective ways of knowing such as dreams and imagination. I believe that that which is worth knowing includes, but is not limited to, what is proven by scientific method.

Though I briefly attempted to separate my roles as researcher and participant, I found that this interfered with the flow of my experience. Therefore, although this is a study in which researcher and participant are intertwined, I endeavour to be transparent and honest with you about my experience.

Major Beliefs and Assumptions.

In the spirit of hermeneutic phenomenology, I begin this section by overtly describing several pertinent and personal beliefs I brought to this research. Then, I explore what I perceive as three major cultural assumptions of the Western world, though they may be held globally as well. As a deeply reflective person, the personal beliefs I list below have undergone much
deliberation and thought. Like my discoveries, my beliefs are not static. My beliefs must be regularly questioned to ensure their validity in a world that lives, breathes, and changes as I do. It seems to me that as a culture, we do not investigate many of the stories we are told or that shape our experiences. Perhaps until we begin to do so, all we can experience are assumptions.

**Personal beliefs.**

I hold four major personal beliefs:

1. I am responsible for and have the capacity to influence the inner and outer landscapes of my being with my thoughts.

2. The inner and outer worlds influence each other, individually and collectively.

3. We can investigate, discover, and intentionally redirect the neurological pathways that influence our experiences.

4. Relationships and communication transcend time, space, and species.

**First belief.**

I am responsible for and have the capacity to influence the inner and outer landscapes of my being with my thoughts. Prior to conducting this research, I held the assumption that all humans have the capacity to affect the world with their thoughts. I now hold the belief that though I am response-able; I cannot be sure how response-able another person is to or for their inner and outer landscapes. It seems as though many people have not yet become aware of their response-abilities, or at least do not know how to make use of them. I leave it to each individual to ponder how true the possibility of this belief is for them.

My belief that I can influence my inner and outer worlds is based on an understanding that thoughts have the capacity to affect what we perceive as matter. Perhaps this influence is because one’s thoughts affect one’s actions. Or, it may be that all matter, at least all living
matter, contains some aspect of consciousness or awareness that is influenced by our thought or intention. Scientists have provided empirical evidence that our thoughts have the capacity to influence our physiology (Lipton, 2008; Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009; Maté, 2003). Several studies have also demonstrated how thought and intention can influence the world external to our bodies: (a) how our thoughts may affect water (Emoto, 2004; Medvedeva, 2008) and plant behaviour (Tompkins & Bird, 1973); (b) how prayer and distance healing may influence patient recovery (Dossey, 1996; Harris, Gowda, & Kolb, 1999; Leder, 2005; Sicher, Targ, Moore, & Smith, 1998); (c) how group meditation may reduce crime rates (Hagelin, 1999); and (d) how our pets may sense our thoughts (Sheldrake, 2011).

Second belief.

The outer and inner worlds influence each other so intricately that they can appear to reflect one another. My mom taught me from an early age that “the world is a mirror.” While my understanding of this aphorism has evolved over the years, I presently understand that my experiences of the outer world are shaped by my beliefs and perceptions, ideas that exist within me. Of course, these beliefs may also exist outside of me within a matrix of beliefs that I share with others of my culture. How could I recognize something in the world if I did not hold an inner notion of it? Concurrently, my inner realm is influenced by, even constructed in partnership with, the world that envelops me. It’s not that these worlds are an exact replica of each other, but aspects of the outer world allow me to become aware of aspects of my inner world, and vice versa.

Because I am made up of what exists in the Cosmos, I understand that the Cosmos exists within me, and as me. “[Y]ou, in the very immediateness of your present awareness, are in fact the entire world” (Wilber, 2006, p. 16). In the mindful present, one seems able to transcend
perceived boundaries of the self and make contact with something larger, something all
everning. There is paradox for me in the ability to embrace my unique individuality and
also my sacred wholeness and interconnectedness.

Using Jungian psychology’ s theory of the shadow, Ford (1998) explains that like a
hologram, each individual holds the whole within. All aspects of humanity are found in each of
us but we have forgotten our wholeness. The shadow consists of those “parts of ourselves that
we have tried to hide or deny” (Ford, 1998, p.1) without conscious awareness. According to this
theory, we admire and resent most in others that which we have subconsciously disowned in
ourselves. For example, if I am fascinated with a movie star, I may attribute to that person’s life
a rich meaning I subconsciously feel is missing from my own. If I don’t recognize and learn to
embrace the meaning in my own life, I may develop a pathological obsession with the actor.
Conversely, I might strongly resent their luxurious lifestyle if I have not accepted and embraced
my own desires for comfort. I have witnessed people who are so opposed to comfort, perhaps
because they feel they don’t deserve it, that they harm their ability to live in community. The
more we embrace the shadow, the parts of ourselves that we don’t yet know, the more
compassion we can have for ourselves and others.

_Third belief._

We can investigate, discover, and intentionally redirect the neurological pathways that
influence our experiences. This belief was nurtured through my experiences with a child on the
severe end of the Autism spectrum. Using a holistic, child-centred program that promotes the
ability to redirect the neurological connections in one’s brain, I worked with Julianne to practice
life skills, such as conversation, personal hygiene, reading, counting, and mutual play. The
changes I witnessed in her affirmed for me that behaviour can be rewired.
As the result of a continuing discipline of practice, patience, and effort on behalf of Julianne and those who interact with her, I have witnessed a transformation in Julianne that I once believed impossible. While I helped Julianne to interact with and see value in human connection, she trained me to recognise the cumulative process involved in the cultivation of new belief structures, perspectives, and behaviours.

Julianne’s mom, Grace, was a co-participant in this research. You’ll meet her in Chapter Three.

Neuroplasticity, which I discuss in the next chapter, is a field of brain science that empirically supports this third belief. The science demonstrates that we can alter the physical structure of the brain through various practices, including mindful meditation (Lazar, et al., 2005; Tang, Lu, Fan, Yang, & Posner, 2012).

Fourth belief.

As a result of several powerful personal experiences, I believe that relationships and communication transcend time, space, and species. Two of the most poignant experiences that support this belief involve: (a) a perspective-altering lesson about life’s cycles from a waterfall (see Appendix E’s The Waterfall on p. 205); and (b) being woken up by a force that repeatedly tapped me on the shoulder, and urgently whispered my name after I fell asleep with a candle burning beside my bed. When I awoke, there was nobody in my room, but the desk where the candle had burned down was on fire.

Cultural assumptions.

I observe three major assumptions taught to me by the culture of which I am a part. I discuss my understanding of the origins of these assumptions more fully in Chapter Two.

1. Pain is to be avoided while pleasure is to be sought.
2. Truth can be measured only by positivist science.

3. Differentiation implies separateness.

First assumption: pain is to be avoided while pleasure is to be sought.

Evolutionarily, living beings are not only driven to avoid discomfort and suffering, but also to seek pleasure. Unfortunately, when this drive is beyond our awareness, it is often at great costs to self, other humans, and the other-than-human world. Much harmful behaviour is likely an unconscious attempt to escape from pain, or to seek pleasure. The sensation of pain, however, can also prompt curiosity and a willingness to be present, while pleasure can prompt gratitude rather than grasping.

Second assumption: truth can be measured only by positivist science.

We are limited by a positivist measure of truth. Ken Wilber (1997, 2000a, 2000b) proposes that in order to make fuller sense of our experiences, we require multiple perspectives including the individual and the collective, as well as the subjective and objective points of view. I appreciate this approach because it is not a this-or-that solution, but rather a marriage of options that then offers a larger understanding of the whole. As we discover new possibilities with an integrative approach, old ideas do not need to be discarded; rather, we can gain an expanded perspective.

Third assumption: differentiation implies separateness.

Perhaps because we have predominately lived with a mechanistic, reductionist worldview (de Quincey, 2002; Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009), those within our culture have a tendency to separate and distinguish parts rather than acknowledge their intimate interconnectedness. In Chapter Two, I explore several theories for why this might be.
Thesis Overview

In Chapter Two, I describe the three streams of literature that have assisted me with this inquiry. These include: (a) the value of mindfulness; (b) a historical scan of the assumptions and beliefs that lie in our blind spot; and neuroscience, the study of the brain’s plasticity and our ability to change our beliefs.

In Chapter Three, I explain my methodology. This is done with the intention to present a map should others decide to travel similar territory, as well as to honour the multiplicity of potential paths. Though the map is never the territory, I have done my best to capture the trail I explored.

In Chapter Four, I share findings from both the personal and the group research.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I offer an interpretation of the research, a personal reflection, a discussion of possible implications for this research, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review & Scholarly Context

In the following chapter, I present literature to support my thesis that by paying attention to our inner world, we can consciously influence the environment of which we are a part. By becoming increasingly aware of the inner climate, we can enhance our transparency and credibility as educators and communicators.

As I pondered how to organize this chapter, a vision of three spirals, each one open and flowing into the next, appeared in my mind during a daily mindfulness practice (see Figure 2.1). Shortly after the image arose, it occurred to me that three interconnected topics and three frames of time are woven into the storyline of this thesis.

The three topics are:

- The value of mindfulness, an intentional practice of focusing our non-judgemental awareness on the present moment.
- A historical scan of assumptions and beliefs that lie in our blind spot.
- Neuroscience, the study of the brain’s plasticity and our ability to change our beliefs.

The three frames of time include the past, the present, and the future; each is linked with the above topics. While the past and future are important considerations, they are, strictly speaking, only certain kinds of ideas that we experience in the present.

- We practice being mindful of the present.
- We tell stories about events we identify as the past in order to make sense of our experience in the present.
The way of the future involves neuroscience, a field where science and spirit converge.¹

Figure 2.1. Feed Me: The Three Spirals

Figure 2.1. The spirals, based on a vision I had during a meditation on June 22, 2012, assisted me with the organizational structure of this chapter. This is a drawing of three baby ravens being fed by their mother. Each baby raven represents a different perspective that I attempted to honour throughout the research. The perspectives, I am, We are, and It is, reference Wilber’s integral model (2006b).

The Present: Mindfulness

Mindfulness “enables its practitioners to become aware of unconscious processes” (McTaggart, 2008, p. 348), and to bring our attention to the present moment. Through this practice, we are better able to see a current experience for what it is, rather than to colour it with resentment or blame from the past, or anxiety about the future. When we are able to inhabit the present, our world expands and possibilities arise.

¹ I acknowledge that I am not always consistent in either my thoughts or language about present, past, or future. Time is a concept that is heavily infused in the language of my culture. My understanding of time is currently unraveling, though I acknowledge its importance in my relationships and communication with others.
Being mindful simply means having good control over your attention: you can place your attention wherever you want and it stays there; when you want to shift it to something else, you can.

When your attention is steady, so is your mind: not rattled or hijacked by whatever pops into awareness, but stably present, grounded, and unshakeable.

Attention is like a spotlight, and what it illuminates streams into your mind and shapes your brain. (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 177)

The practice of mindfulness is often attributed to “Siddhartha—not yet enlightened, not yet called the Buddha” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 12), a man who lived over two thousand years ago. After years of training his mind, Siddhartha came to an awareness of the root of suffering. He then spent the rest of his life teaching “the three pillars of Buddhist practice” (p. 13): virtue, wisdom, and mindfulness.

During the nineteen-fifties, Daisetz Suzuki is said to have brought Zen Buddhism to Western culture (Gordon, 2009). Following this, it is Shunryu Suzuki who is often credited for making the practice of beginner’s mind accessible to the lay person (Smith in Suzuki, 2011). “The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities” (Baker in Suzuki, 2011, p. xiv).

Today, mindfulness is taught and practiced in several contexts and settings. In addition to variations of the above-mentioned traditional, spiritual Buddhist teachings, there are also scientific, medical approaches, such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

Though Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR, has a background in Zen Buddhism, he teaches mindfulness within the context of behavioural medicine rather than spirituality to avoid
preconceived notions people may have about religion. Gordon (2009) describes Kabat-Zinn’s perspective:

Mindfulness is at the very heart of Buddhism, mindfulness is a universal quality that transcends religious traditions and can exist independently of any Buddhist context. Mindfulness is simply a particular way to pay attention, to look into oneself with the perspective of self-inquiry and self-understanding. (Gordon, 2009, p. 44)

Mindfulness involves “allowing yourself to be exactly where you are and as you are, and for the world to be exactly as it is in the moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 61); it is “to let be and let go; neither reject nor cling” (Kull, 2009, p. 290). In mindfulness, we practice “giving ourselves over to all our senses” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 70). We give credence and attention to the subjective perspective, one that we’ve been trained to disregard in a predominantly positivist culture.

While there are several ways to practice mindfulness, sitting meditation is a common method. For this technique, the practitioner is seated in a comfortable, upright position, and the breath is frequently used as an anchor. When we focus on the breath, we can bring ourselves to the present moment, which is when the breath occurs. We may feel the coolness of the air as it goes in through the nostrils and the warmth as it goes out, or we may notice our belly filling with air as our shirt and belt tighten against our skin, and then loosen when we exhale. During a practice of mindfulness, bodily sensations and mental experiences are noticed, acknowledged, and released. We might begin a practice by paying attention to our breath, then move to the sensations occurring in our skin, hearing, smell, taste, or a combination of all these sensations in the present moment. Thoughts about the past or future are acknowledged and then gently
released without judgement. A mindful practice involves repeatedly bringing our attention back to the sensations of the present moment. In *Full Catastrophe Living: Using Your Body and Mind to Face Stress Pain and Illness* (1990), Kabat-Zinn presents detailed instructions of an eight-week MBSR program so that it may be experienced by any reader at home.

More often than not, a new practitioner of mindfulness is unable to stay present for long; a thought of what needs to get done, what we want, or a memory or anticipation arises. We end up carried away by these ideas, which are not based in the present. Then, we realise we are no longer present with our current experience but lost in the past or future of our thinking mind. The realisation that we have drifted away from the present moment is part of the practice. When this happens, we gently return to our breath, and begin again in the present moment. Once our attention becomes stabilized on the breath, we can then begin to open our mindful awareness to other aspects of our present experience.

Though the history, complex structures, language, and religious nature of Buddhism remain a mystery to me, I resonate with its underlying philosophies. I’ve found strong meaning and relevance in several recorded teachings by Pema Chödrön, the resident nun at Gampo Abbey, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nova Scotia, Canada. The following is a quote of Chödrön’s that Bob gave us in his systems course. Though I had heard of Chödrön before and had one of her audio books on anger, this particular quote has influenced my thinking over the past couple of years, including the direction of this research:

> We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don’t really get solved. They come together and fall apart. Then they come together and fall apart again. It’s just like that. (Chödrön, 1997, p. 10)
Chödrön (2012) explains that ordinary occurrences in our lives hold potential for both suffering and freedom; it depends on how we respond to the events that makes the difference. Not only is every state of mind transient and ever-changing but so is the state of every living system; we cannot fix what is (Chödrön, 2012). Circumstances are not meant to be fixed; they are meant to flow. Perhaps the best we can do is to be conscious of our assumptions and beliefs about how our experience of the world should or shouldn’t be, and to practice allowing things to be as they are. Acceptance is quite unlike apathy or indifference. When we accept circumstances as they are, we also bear witness to the pain of an experience. Through this, there is often a shift in our response to the situation, or in the situation itself.

Our society is in the “early stages of waking up as a culture to the potential of interiority” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 37). The practice of mindfulness is a powerful tool for “cultivating awareness” (p. 37). It frees us from “the veils and limitations of our routinized thought patterns” (p. 10), and our habitual ways of being. Mindfulness permits us to become aware of unconscious assumptions and beliefs and therefore liberate ourselves from their power. A mindful practice assists us to suspend a tendency for automatic, sometimes harmful, reactive behaviours.

Many successful change-makers partake in a daily reflective practice, a commitment that appears to enhance creative intuition and allow us to be present for the world and its communications with us (Scharmer, 2009; Westley, Zimmerman & Patton, 2007). In the mindful present, we seem able to transcend perceived boundaries of the self and make contact with something greater, something all encompassing. By cultivating a mindful practice, we are better able to “develop the ability to stand still in the middle of the action, to tease out the pattern around [us] in order to understand deeply the dynamic [we] seek to change” (Westley et al., 2007, p. 60).
Mindfulness also wakes us up to the blind spot; “the place from which our attention and intention is happening” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 10). Should each person in the community become aware of his or her “field structure of attention” (p. 11), we may find ourselves creating fertile ground for purposeful action toward a cultural shift. While an individual’s focus is integral to the process of change, it is the act of “collectively becoming aware of our inner places” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 10) that may be “the single most important leverage point for shifting the social field in this century and beyond” (p. 10).

The practice of mindfulness permits us to become conscious of the assumptions and beliefs that influence our experiences of the world. The practice can help us to remain present and non-judgemental. It can assist us to open our minds to new stimuli and opportunities. It is a tool that may support as we creatively address life-threatening dilemmas – such as climate change – from the inside out.

**The Past: Exploring the Roots of Personal and Cultural Assumptions**

Though the past is a harmful place to dwell, it is useful to consider the origin of our “set of assumptions about the nature of reality that dramatically shapes the way we know and interact with the world” (de Quincey, 2002, p. 41). When we do not know the history or purpose of an assumption or belief, we are more apt to be unconsciously directed by it. As the fictional gorilla in Quinn’s *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit* (1992) reveals to his disciple, until we understand our culture’s story, we remain its captive.

Many of the stories we tell ourselves are passed down from one generation to the next. While assumptions and beliefs may serve a purpose in some contexts, it is important to be aware of how they can hinder us as well. Often, our assumptions are so ingrained in our culture’s language, institutions, and customs, that we remain unaware of them. Coming into this research,
I was particularly curious about the history of some of the dominant assumptions I witness in Western culture. These assumptions include those about (a) the sensations of pain and pleasure, (b) how truth is measured, and (c) differentiation.

**Sensations of pain and pleasure.**

The tendency to avoid discomfort, and to seek pleasure, has emerged from an instinctual drive for survival (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). Earlier in the evolution of our species, disregard for discomfort often led to death. Both physical and emotional discomfort could prove lethal. Physical unease, such as cold or illness, was deadly if left unattended, while social rejection from the group frequently led to exile, and eventual mortality. Our ancestors survived by paying attention to and avoiding that which threatened their comfort and by seeking that which gave them pleasure.

Within our brain, default network systems are established based on past experiences and evolutionary response patterns (Hanson & Mendius, 2009; MacLean, 1990; Rees, 2010). The more these networks are triggered, the more entrenched they become. While these connections permit us to perform everyday tasks such as eat, breathe, digest, drive, walk, and talk without much thought or awareness, they can also activate inappropriate responses, or prove dangerous when we operate with little or no attention to the present moment.

For survival reasons, these neurological networks also evolved to register and reactivate connections that trigger pain more so than those that result in pleasure (Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Rees, 2010). This explains why one painful event can consume more mental energy than several neutral or positive experiences. Our “negativity bias” (Vaish, Grossmann & Woodward, 2008) involves the brain’s evolutionary function to scan the inner and outer environments for
threats. This bias can result in an underlying sense of dis-ease and anxiety, especially when we are unaware of it and its purpose.

When we are unaware of the instinctive functions of our brain, suffering can ensue (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). We tend to push away the signals of discomfort, and then become confused and unhappy when they resurface. We continue to avoid, sometimes at great cost, triggers that are associated with emotional, spiritual, physical, or mental pain, rather than investigate what our mind and body is communicating about them. Through the illumination of our assumptions and beliefs about the threats to our comfort, we discover the choice to explore and become curious about the triggers of our pain and the sensation itself, rather than instinctively resist.

While our ancestors learned to survive by avoiding pain and seeking pleasure, this pattern has become problematic as the human brain and technology evolve. Hanson and Mendius (2009) describe “inescapable physical or mental discomfort [as] the ‘first dart’ of existence” (p. 50). The second darts, the ones that lead to unneeded suffering, are “the ones we throw ourselves” (p. 50) in reaction to the first dart. It is in trying to avoid the inevitability of pain, and in seeking to grasp at the fleeting nature of pleasure, that we suffer most.

Should we become pathologically locked into the habit of avoiding stimuli that trigger discomfort, while seeking those that lead to pleasure, the harmful effects can snowball. The more we attempt to resist inevitable discomfort, the more stressed we may feel. The more stressed we feel, the more actively the brain scans for threats, and the less open we are to positive or neutral stimuli. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness, which can then increase the sensations of anxiety, and perpetuate the cycle.
While we may not be able to eliminate all pain-provoking stimuli in the world, perhaps we can alter our beliefs about these triggers or our experience of them, and thus reduce our suffering. Rather than “stimulate, dull, or pollute our own minds” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 102) with efforts to seek “some relief from our pain” (p. 103) or unhappiness, we may decide to consciously honour, listen to, and question the uncomfortable sensations that arise in our bodies. It seems that while discomfort and “pain [are] inherent to living, suffering is optional” (Kull, 2009, p. 267).

Though we may be unable to reverse the evolution of the human brain, we can certainly bring awareness to how it works to keep us safe. We can learn to accept pain and discomfort as reminders that our brain is actively engaged in our survival. In this way, we can choose to respond creatively to the brain’s signals rather than react habitually to them.

**How truth is measured.**

Western culture’s frequent claim that positivist science and quantitative measurement are the only valid means with which to discover truth is most often attributed to René Descartes and Isaac Newton. Some researchers, however, claim the roots of positivism reach at least as far back as Plato’s work (de Quincey, 2002; Lipton & Bhearman, 2009).

Within a positivist, or materialist perspective of science, the mind “is just a fiction, a ghostly epiphenomenon of the material brain” (de Quincey, 2002, p. 4). Descartes, whose contributions were to the field of philosophy, is often credited with the split between mind and matter, although some scholars (Gangadean, 2008) suggest Descartes was misunderstood as a result of the time in which he lived. Newton, whose impact was on the realm of the physical world, convinced many that “bodies could influence each other only by local contact” (de Quincey, 2002, p. 19). Through these lenses, the universe is viewed as a machine, made
“wholly [of] insentient matter in motion...until nervous systems and brains evolved”
(de Quincey, 2002, p. 20). The differentiation between the material and the non-material worlds somehow implied an absolute separation, where truth could be measured only by positivist methods. The belief that the universe can only be known through the material senses has been dominant in our culture for over four hundred years.

In their book, Spontaneous Evolution; Our Positive Future and a Way to Get There From Here, Lipton & Bhearman (2009) describe the gradual shift of power from the immaterial word of God to the scientific method. Though the transition occurred over several centuries, two major players toward the end of it – whose stories demonstrate the pathological fundamentalism of the Catholic Church – were Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). In his youth, Copernicus put forth a controversial model with the sun, not the Earth, at the centre of our universe. Fearing repercussions for blasphemy from the Church, Copernicus waited until he was on his death bed to have his book printed. Almost a century later, Galileo, considered by some as “the father of science” (Weidhorn, 2005, p. 155), had his life threatened by the Church and spent his life under house arrest for supporting Copernicus’s heliocentric theory.

However, the sciences took root and gradually truth, measured with the material senses, gained ground over the subjectively experienced and faith-based acceptance of the word of God. As we see in the similarities between the cultural response to Copernicus and Galileo – despite almost a century between them – “it takes time for human consciousness to accept major changes.” (Lipton & Bhearman, 2009, p. 3). Change does occur, however, and the pendulum representing human ideas of truth swung toward its polar opposite, virtually wiping out the acceptance of non-material ways of knowing.
While the materialist paradigm served a purpose in freeing Western society from what some recognized as a corruption of the Catholic Church, an unbalanced surrender of authority to objective science seems to have led to a cultural perspective of fragmented, separate, and individually measured entities; we believe we can understand a living system by dissecting it into parts and studying the parts separately. While this seems to be in flux again, so that we are more and more open to truth that we cannot measure, the positivist paradigm has left many of us feeling “alienated in the universe, without a sense of being at home” (de Quincey, 2002, p. 16). Lipton and Bhearmar (2009) suggest it is now time to consider whether we want to continue swinging back and forth between the subjective and objective extremes of our bipolar measurements for truth, or if we’d like to integrate these two aspects of our experience.

The breakdown of scientific materialism is often credited to Albert Einstein’s relativity theory. Our understanding of science has been further challenged by the discoveries of quantum and complexity theories. Additionally, the growth of a global community by way of technology has introduced us to other ways of experiencing truth. It’s not that Newtonian science is wrong or irrelevant, but rather that it is not the only way to know the world.

While I cannot claim to clearly understand the theories mentioned in the last paragraph, philosopher of mind Christian de Quincey (2002) describes how they support our capacity to know beyond what can be proven with the scientific method. Relativity theory demonstrates that “matter itself is a form of energy, not solid ‘stuff’” (p. 22). Quantum theory shows that “subatomic physical events are not causal [but rather] are inherently uncertain and unpredictable” (p. 23) and somehow “involve the choice or consciousness of the observer” (p. 23). Complexity theory proposes that “any attempt to control a complex system by introducing an overriding cause will fail because the cause immediately produces nonlinear
effects that reverberate throughout the system and affect the performance of the cause itself” (pp. 28-29). These theories offer the possibility for truth to exist beyond material evidence.

De Quincey (2002) claims that “we critically need a *science of mind* to match our science of matter” (p. 13). His solution is “radical naturalism,” a theory based on panpsychism that states “*matter is intrinsically sentient*–it is both subjective and objective” (p. 48). Essentially, “we exist as embodied subjects–as *subjective objects* or feeling matter” (p. 45). Pure objectivity doesn’t work because “to define something [as a separate object] is to freeze it in a moment, to suck it out of time, to abstract it” (p. 62). De Quincey advises that we’re in need of what Rosen (1994) calls an “epistemotherapy,” an approach that will assist us in the creation of “a worldview that includes the storyteller” (de Quincey, 2002, p. 80), and “involves nonrational and nonsensory ways of knowing” (p. 150).

Wilber (1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2006a, 2006b) offers a framework for such a multifaceted worldview with his “all quadrants, all levels, all lines, all states, all types” (AQAL) map; an integral and trans-disciplinary approach to investigating the territory that envelops and flows through us. In a simplified interpretation, the truth involves “complementary and interrelated, interweaving realities” (Kazlev, 2009) including the interior individual (intentional-me), exterior individual (behavioural-it), interior collective (cultural-we), and exterior collective (systemic-its) perspectives.

You can look at any event from the point of view of the ‘I’ (or how I personally see and feel about the event); from the point of view of the ‘we’ (how not just I but others see the event); and as an ‘it’ (or the objective facts of the event).

(Wilber, 2006b, p. 27)

I incorporated these three perspectives into my illustration above (see Figure 2.1).
As Brown (2005) explains, “the Right-Hand quadrants (Behavior and Systems) examine the surfaces of individuals and collectives, while the Left-Hand quadrants (Consciousness and Culture) look into their depths” (p. 11). In the integral model, (see Figure 2.2), the left side represents the subjective and inter-subjective points of view, while the right half embodies the objective and inter-objective perspectives. Wilber’s integral model does not imply that objective observation is unimportant, but rather that since it can apprehend only the physical, it does not represent the whole truth.

Quantitative measurement provides us with part of the truth, yet we neglect vital aspects of our experience when we limit our source of knowledge to the objective, outer world. As I observe our cultural habits in the West, it seems the belief that truth is found outside of us has not only limited our solution-creating abilities but it has also done great harm to our health and wellness. I witness members of our culture, including myself, who attempt to change that which exists in the outer landscape, while we often ignore or are oblivious to, the changes that must
occur within us. The literature I’ve explored demonstrates that while truth exists in the objective realm, we must also recognize, source, and give credence to our own innate knowledge and wisdom, both culturally and individually. If we seek to know the truth, we would do well to access not just the outer, objective, but also the inner, subjective realm for a fuller understanding of the whole.

In order to fully comprehend the story, we must also know the storyteller; both are intimately intertwined. We must not only explore and honour what we find in the material world but also that which exists within.

**Differentiation.**

“There is only one issue in the world. It’s the reintegration of matter and mind” (Zen Master Nan Huai-Chin cited in Scharmer, 2009, p. 54).

While the argument can be made that differentiation between parts serves a purpose, we limit our capacity to develop holistic responses to complex challenges, such as climate change, when we do not consider the components as interrelated parts of the whole. These parts cannot be separated from each other because they are nested in a greater, integrated whole. As explored in the section above, objective matter and subjective mind have been erroneously separated by human perception. While the inner and outer landscapes may be distinct, parts of a greater whole cannot fully be understood in isolation from each other. Differentiation does not imply separation.

A human-made separation that is important for environmental educators and communicators to investigate—one that I propose is intimately linked with the split between matter and mind—is the schism we’ve imagined between human nature and wild nature. As an example of this imagined separation, I use the environmental assessment process used by Parks
Canada, the federal agency responsible in Canada for “maintaining and restoring ecological integrity, through the protection of natural resources and natural processes,” (Canada National Parks Act, 2012, sec. 8). While the purpose of this legal act is to protect what is “natural,” the environmental assessment process does not consider the economic or psycho-socio impacts that activity within the park boundaries has on humans. According to the primary government agency dedicated to protecting nature, it therefore appears as though humans are not “natural resources and natural processes.” We have separated ourselves from the whole.

During my literature review, I discovered several hypotheses about the origins of the false separation between humans and nature. Abram (1996) suggests that the advent of the alphabet opened “a new distance...between human culture and the rest of nature” (p. 100), while Commoner (1971) and Jonas (1984) point to human greed and sense of dominance fuelled by capitalism and technological innovations. White (1967) blames the perceived dislocation on Judeo-Christianity and the biblical story of Genesis, while Quinn (1992) points to the agricultural revolution, when humans began accumulating more than was needed. Below, I explore how the written word, science and technology, and religion have impacted Western culture’s misinterpretation that differentiation infers separation.

In Spell of the Sensuous, Abram (1996) illuminates the innate and complex bonds between person and planet, “the storied earth,” (p. 154). He claims that our awareness of this interconnectedness with the Earth was severed with the invention of the written word. Abram (1996) shows how “the coherence of human language is inseparable from the coherence of the surrounding ecology, from the expressive vitality of the more-than-human terrain” (p. 179). Though we tend to limit the concept of consciousness to the human experience, “sentience never
was our private possession. We live immersed in intelligence, enveloped and informed by a creativity we cannot fathom” (Abram, 2010, p. 129).

“The linguistic patterns of an oral culture remain uniquely responsive, and responsible, to the more-than-human life-world, or bioregion, in which that culture is embedded” (Abram, 1996, p. 178). However, with the creation of the alphabet, “ancestral wisdom was no longer carried by the land but by the written word” (p. 240). “As the written text began to speak...the voices of the forest, and of the river [began] to fade” (p. 254); textual literacy no longer required our partnership with the land to make sense of the world.

Gradually, “the world became one giant machine, without any intrinsic feeling, without any real meaning or purpose. [The land’s] only value was its potential for exploitation by science and technology to serve the functions of industry, commerce, and government” (de Quincey, 2002, p. 5). Nature became man’s property, an object, with “no inherent sacredness or meaning” (p. 5) of its own. We began to imagine that the distinction between nature and humans implied separateness; they were no longer complementary parts of the whole.

White (1967) argues that the perspective of human’s “power over nature” (p. 1203) is a result of the misinterpretation of religious text, such as that found in the biblical story of Genesis. In the 1960s, White prophesized “a worsening of the ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (p. 1207). According to White, we must expose and question the underlying assumptions we’ve inherited from Western culture’s dominating religion if we wish for change to occur. We need to rethink our old religion or dream up a new one. “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion” (p. 1205).
The field of eco-psychology—an integration of ecology and psychology—may offer us some of the tools we’ll need to expose, question, and modify our assumptions and beliefs about the illusory separation between mind and matter; inner and outer; human nature and wild nature.

Kidner (2007) proposes “a largely unrecognised link between psychological health and the state of the natural world” (p. 124) and suggests the “self reaches out empathically over the land, which in turn is experienced as an extension of self” (p. 128). By repressing the “ecological level of the unconscious,” our “inherent sense of environmental reciprocity” (Roszak, 2002, p. 304) lies dormant and we end up “suffering the ecological crisis as a consequence” (Fisher, 2002, p. 4).

Though we cannot change the past, it is important that we investigate it so that we understand the origin and context of the individual and the cultural assumptions and beliefs that tend to influence our behaviour in and experience of the world. It is my thesis that many of our assumptions and deep beliefs exist within the blind spot that Scharmer (2009) refers to. If we do not illuminate and question the stories we tell ourselves, we won’t likely understand the filters through which we perceive our experiences. Thus, self-directed, conscious change becomes an enigma. Even if we want to change our behaviour to affect the course of anthropogenic climate change, such a transformation is unlikely if we don’t recognize the assumptions and beliefs that influence our harmful and self-destructive actions.

The Future: Neuroscience

Neuroscience is the study of the human brain. Though we have been to the moon and have landed our technology on Mars, we still have very little understanding of the human brain and how it functions. However, with the recent partnership of science and spirituality (Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009; Wallace, 2007), I’m eager to observe the
unfolding integration of neuroscience and mindfulness. A branch of neuroscience, known as neuroplasticity, is a fascinating field that demonstrates how with practice, we can use our mind to change the physical structures of our brain (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

The mind and the brain “interact with each other so profoundly that they’re best understood a single, co-dependent, mind/brain system” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 7). In a sense, “your mind is made by your brain, body, natural world, and human culture” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 7).

Siegal, a professor of clinical psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, explains how the intentional focus of attention can change the function and structure of the brain. The mind, according to Siegal (2010, 2011), is “an emergent self-organizing process that regulates the movement of information and energy flow” (Siegal, 2011). By learning to focus our attention, and through the monitoring and modification of the thoughts that arise in our mind, the possibility of choice is brought into a system (Siegal, 2010, 2011).

Scientists are using modern technology, such as magnetic resonance imaging and electroencephalography, to study the human ability to modify neurological connections, and to further engage the areas of our brain that are linked with intention, concentrated focus, and even happiness (McTaggart, 2008). According to the field of neuroplasticity, it is feasible to train ourselves to receive, process, and transmit information that is more conducive to an eco-logical and interconnected existence. An individual can potentially cultivate a perception of belonging in the world. Even a sense of harmony with the sensation of pain can be learned if neurological connections are rewired so that discomfort is not always considered a threat to survival.

Self-consciousness, which appears as activity in the prefrontal cortex of our brain, is responsible for only a fraction of our behaviour (Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Lipton, 2008; Lipton
“The prefrontal cortex is the neurological platform that enables humans to realize their personal identity and experience the quality of thinking” (Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009, p. 31). The remainder of our behaviour is directed by our subconscious mind (Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009, p. 343). Lipton & Bhaerman clarify the difference between “conventional consciousness,” which “enables an organism to assess and respond to conditions in the environment,” (p. 31) and “self-consciousness [which] is what enables us to be co-creators, not merely responders to stimuli” (p. 31). “Self-consciousness provides the option for self-reflection and the ability to review and edit [our] performance” (p. 32), yet we greatly overestimate our use of this part of our brain (Rees, 2010).

Maclean (1990) offers a model of the evolutionary triune brain that supports Lipton & Bhaerman’s (2009) theory of unconscious and conscious mind. The triune brain consists of three parts: (a) the oldest, inner part known as the reptilian brain, responsible for the fight or flight mechanisms of survival; (b) the limbic system, responsible for emotions and values; and (c) the neo-cortex, associated with conscious, logical reasoning. Rees (2010) explains that “in situations of conflict or resource scarcity…basic survival-oriented bio-behavioural predispositions that operate beneath consciousness (i.e. in the limbic system and reptilian brain stem) may well override rational thought processes” (p. 19). We become unilaterally focussed; our mind closes and we rely on habitual reactions and ways of being.

Lipton (2008) hypothesizes that the human mind has evolved to perform two primary functions that help us to survive: protection and growth. Near the beginning of this chapter, in the section about sensation, I described how the brain works to keep us safe: it scans the environment for danger. Growth is also an important function as “billions of cells in [the] body wear out and need to be replaced” (Lipton, 2008, p. 115) daily. When we are in a constant state
of protection, under the threat of planetary doom, for example, our growth behaviour is stunted because the mind cannot operate to its full extent in the presence of a perceived threat (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

When we are in danger, real or imagined, a fight or flight response is fuelled throughout our body to ensure survival. “Growth processes require an open exchange between an organism and its environment….However, protection requires a closing down of the system to wall the organism off from the perceived threat (Lipton, 2008, p. 116). Because the growth function is also responsible for the “creation of life sustaining energy” (p. 116), chronic stress can literally choke off our vitality.

The self-conscious mind is self-reflective; it is a newly evolved ‘sense organ’ that observes our own behaviors and emotions….It can observe any programmed behaviors we are engaged in, evaluate the behavior, and consciously decide to change the program. We can actively choose how to respond to most environmental signals and whether we even want to respond at all. The conscious mind’s capacity to override the subconscious mind’s preprogrammed behaviors is the foundation of free will. (Lipton, 2008, p. 104)

When we are overwhelmed by stress, the body sends energy to the subconscious mind, the “reflex activity controlled” (Lipton, 2008, p. 120) part of the brain, and starves the conscious mind, “the center of executive reasoning and logic” (p. 120) in the forebrain. We can then suffer a loss of awareness and even intelligence (Arnsten & Goldman-Rakic, 1998; Goldstein, Rasmusson, Bunney, & Roth, 1996; Lipton, 2008; Takamatsu, Noda, Kurumaji, Murakami, Tatsumi, Ichise, & Nishimura, 2003). While this reaction may assist us tremendously in the event of a life-threatening situation, it is not always appropriate for the everyday environmental
challenges we encounter in our daily responsibilities and relationships. “An increasing body of research suggests that our hyper-vigilant lifestyle is severely impacting the health of our bodies” (Lipton, 2008, p. 121) and our ability to seek novel solutions.

By becoming aware of our beliefs about the triggers of our discomfort, we can better manage the survival mechanisms that our brain has evolved to activate. It is not that we want to eliminate or override the subconscious mind, as this can result in “serious neurological disorders” (Lipton, 2008, p. 140). Instead, we can work pro-actively to rewire new beliefs. As we gradually and gently learn to acknowledge the assumptions and beliefs that influence our behaviour, we may even begin to express gratitude for the part of our brain that works diligently to keep us safe.

The field of neuroscience has enormous implications for how we educate and communicate about life-threatening issues, such as climate change. If we continue to use fear based messages to change behaviour, we may find ourselves with fewer and fewer solutions as more and more minds function to protect the organism rather than permit it to grow. Should we learn to be present with discomfort, perhaps even with death, we may discover that new possibilities and solutions lay just beyond our comfort zones.

**Chapter Summary**

A lack of inner awareness is harmful. Though humans have been blessed with the capacity for rational and insightful thought to guide our behaviour, it appears as though we overestimate our use of it. Instead, we often react to the world from within our “blind spot,” a place where we unconsciously store assumptions and beliefs that colour our experiences. Some of these assumptions and beliefs are not even ours but are tacitly passed down through the generations by way of our language and traditions. Occasionally, the assumptions and beliefs are
not relevant in the present moment but continue to impact our thoughts and behaviour. The exciting news is that while “we are wedded by habit and tradition to an outmoded view of the Universe..., civilization is pregnant with a new, exciting, and optimistic understanding of life” (Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009, p. 2). Our task is to be present and open to this.

With a practice of mindfulness, we are better prepared to exercise our response-ability to be in the present without judgement. The field of neuroscience is an objective science that can show us the physical benefits of remaining open to a sentient universe, “a magnificent creation brimming with spirit and consciousness” (de Quincey, 2002, p. xxi).
Chapter Three: Methodologies and Research Design

In addition to an exploration of literature relevant to my research questions, I also conducted a four month personal study and a two month group study. Through these methods, I examined how relationships are influenced by:

- a practice of mindfulness;
- a practice of illuminating and investigating my beliefs;
- a practice of fostering beliefs of belonging.

Rationale for Chosen Methodologies

One learns to know only what one loves, and the deeper and fuller the knowledge is to be, the more powerful and vivid must be the love, indeed the passion.

(Goethe, 1963, p. 83)

In selecting my approach to this research, it was important that I: (a) honour multiple ways of knowing; (b) allow for the co-participation of community; (c) welcome the subjective, often immeasurable, yet valid experiences I have of life; (d) be passionate about my inquiry; and (e) learn my topics experientially. With this in mind, I drew from and integrated several qualitative methodologies including: (a) hermeneutic phenomenology; (b) organic, intuitive, and cooperative inquiries; (c) a circle practice; and (d) integral theory.

Hermeneutic phenomenology.

Hermeneutic phenomenology interprets lived experience. “Hermeneutic research is interpretive” (Laverty, 2003, p. 15). It aims to construct understanding while using both individual and social “historical meanings of experience” (p. 15). Phenomenological research seeks “to question the way we experience the world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5) and to “make the invisible visible” (Laverty, 2003, p. 15). Hermeneutic phenomenology suits my inquiry about
the origins of personal and cultural beliefs, and how we experience the world before, during, and after we examine, and perhaps alter, these filters.

Hermeneutic phenomenology allows researchers to explore and reflect upon their interests intimately; it permits us to be and become that which we are passionately curious about (Van Manen, 1990). As an approach that permits the storyteller and the story to co-exist, co-create, and co-evolve, hermeneutic phenomenology consents to a caring and deeply involved researcher, rather than one who is separate from, and purely objective about, the exploration.

Laverty (2003) explains the differences between hermeneutic phenomenology and Husserl’s phenomenology (1980). First, hermeneutic phenomenology does not practice “the act of suspending one’s various beliefs in the reality of the natural world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 175). Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (1983, 2004) claim that this separation between storyteller and story, also referred to as bracketing, is reductionist and limits the study of lived experience. One’s beliefs and experiences significantly influence the dynamic interpretations we make of the world, and therefore, cannot be excluded from our work. Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology keeps the research story alive and fluid; it offers no certainty of a correct answer or final result. Instead, the researcher(s) overtly name(s) personal assumptions, which are inevitably embedded in the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003).

I recognize that a myriad of understandings and perspectives is feasible. Any consequential meaning the co-participants and I have found has been co-constructed through our efforts to bring “life to the experience [we] explored, through the use of imagination, the hermeneutic circle, and attention to language and writing” (Laverty, 2003, p. 21). The outcome is an evolving, dialectic multi-verse; a co-creation of researcher, co-participants, the topics, and our individual and collective contexts.
Organic inquiry.

Organic inquiry, a multi-disciplinary approach, emerged from transpersonal psychology, feminist theory, and spirituality (Clements, Ettling, Jenett & Shields, 1998; Clements, 2002; Clements, 2004; Curry & Wells, 2006). Researchers engage “with the sacred in some manner...through researcher preparations and attitude, in participant recruitment and selection, in data collection and data analysis, and in interpretation and final report” (Curry & Wells, 2006, p. 8). The approach is “rooted in respect for the feminine, the earth, and the involvement of those that are part of the study” (Clements, 2002). “Because Organic Inquiry holds an assumption that all things are sacred and interconnected, it allows the researcher to find connections between things that might otherwise be thought separate” (Curry & Wells, 2006, pp. 7-8).

The sacred can be understood as “an attitude or atmosphere in which one is aware of, and respectful and reverential toward, the indwelling of Spirit” (Curry & Wells, 2006, p. 11), where Spirit is “an embodying creative force, or life-force energy” (p. 11). Sacred is a “quality of being” (p. 20), while spiritual refers to the type of “practices that one may do to align with the teleologic energy of Spirit” (p. 20).

Organic inquiry invites researchers to work “in partnership with liminal and spiritual influences as well as with the experiences of participants” (Clements, 2004). The term liminal, first developed by Van Gnepp (1960), has been used to describe the transitional phase in a rite of passage; after one has been separated from a previous world and before they have been reintegrated into a new one. Curry & Wells (2006) describe the liminal as “the space between the mundane and the sacred, which in psychological terms could be viewed as the personal subconscious and collective unconscious domains” (p. 9). Further, “the liminal is a productive
transition state reached by shifting awareness wherein one more easily feels the sacred and hears Spirit, and where the tests and challenges, fears and doubts are reflectively examined” (Curry & Wells, 2006, p. 20).

The liminal has been especially relevant through this research as I’ve fostered my ability to explore a space of “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967, p. 93) in my own life, identity, and place in the world. I’ve visited the threshold between old assumptions and new belief systems, perspectives, and ways of being in the world. It is a non-material place of freedom that I’ve enjoyed investigating, and intend to visit again. Through nature wanderings, meditations, dreams, synchronicities, and art, the co-participants and I collected information from the everyday, but also from liminal and spiritual realms, suprarational states “beyond ego that may be visited by the individual psyche to gather useful experience” (Clements, 2004, p. 27).

**Intuitive inquiry.**

Closely related to organic inquiry is intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2000, 2004). Intuition works through one or more ways of knowing, which according to Gallegos (1991), include feeling, imagining, sensing, and thinking. Intuition is the ability to know things “for which there is no immediate evidence” (p. 6).

Intuitive inquiry asks its researchers to identify their own “values and assumptions through active and connected engagement” (Anderson, 2000, par. 7) with the study and uses these perspectives to explore others’ experiences. “Rather than discarding and bracketing our experiences as researchers, intuitive inquiry consciously and adroitly positions the researcher and his or her experiences at the core of the research endeavour” (Anderson, 2000, par. 18). As a result, “compassionately informed research is qualitatively different from emotionally detached research” (Anderson, 2000, par. 11).
Though both organic and intuitive inquiries are methodologies in development, they support the partnership of spirit and science in the aim of an integrated understanding of the whole. Distinct from a purely positivist approach—a paradigm that seems to rob meaning and wonder from my experience of life—the methodologies I’ve pulled from also honour subjective ways of knowing. These approaches bring the objective and the subjective together to reconcile the bi-polarization of science and spirit. In using these methodologies, I found space for all of me, including, but not limited to, my mind and body. Because of this, I sense that I have authentically embodied an understanding of the questions I’ve asked.

**Cooperative inquiry.**

“Cooperative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience, and reflecting together on it” (Heron, 1996, p. 1). In this methodology, the co-participants are “co-subject[s] in the experience phases and co-researcher[s] in the reflection phases” (p. 1). This approach involves an inquiry by several people who are “deeply engaged with the human condition, living and choosing with awareness” (Heron, 1996, p. 37).

**Circle council.**

As with cooperative inquiry, the leadership in a circle council is shared. Baldwin (1998) explains that a circle is a way to come together in community for authentic communication and decision-making. In a circle, no one is at the helm; everyone is essential to the circle’s function and is asked to show up fully. The circle can involve two or more people who “convene to create a sacred space and from that space accomplish a specific task, supporting each other in the process” (Baldwin, 1998, p. 14). Though there are “simple rituals” (p. 14) involved in a circle
council, each gathering is self-governed and creates its own “common sense agreements of behavior” (p. 14).

Though it did not occur with this research, I am genuinely intrigued by the concept of using a circle for the purpose of designing and implementing a study, where co-participants are co-researchers from start to finish.

**Integral theory.**

Wilber’s integral theory (1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2006a, 2006b) is an all-inclusive, multi-disciplinary framework that attempts to repair the fragmented and partial stories we are prone to hear and tell. To honour multiple ways of knowing, integral theory acknowledges first, second, and third person perspectives in any story. The subjective and objective points of view from both individuals and collectives are considered and woven into the whole.

**Rationale for Research Design**

Collective action is considered a principal leverage point for social change (Scharmer, 2009). In order to change a system as individuals, we must also be willing to change as parts of that collective system (Westley et al., 2007). I felt it was significant that I: (a) conduct a personal study; (b) invite community to join me in a collective exploration; and (c) learn how others experience the questions I pose.

As my intention was to inquire *with* rather than *about* those who participated in the group study, I felt I needed to share the control they may have perceived me to hold as the initiating researcher. I did this by inviting the co-participants to help me design aspects of the research. After I created the research proposal, I presented a summary of it to the research group members and solicited feedback. In response, I altered the daily time commitment for our mindfulness practice to gradually increase rather than begin with thirty minutes per day. Additionally, the co-
participants chose to collect and record their information using several methods rather than just writing. I adjusted the design to agree with everyone and to honour multiple ways of knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997). I experienced a high level of commitment from the group members, and was able to receive “fully informed consent” (p. 9) from them regarding the study’s design and goals. Working in partnership with others, while surrendering definitive control of a project, seems to have enhanced the generative and engaging atmosphere of this project. It also relieved pressure I may have felt had I believed I was solely responsible for the outcome.

In addition to seeking feedback about the research design, I initially invited each co-participant to facilitate a group meeting. Though we experimented with this at the start, I experienced anxiety when I was unable to clearly detect the information I was seeking from our gatherings. I understand that this effort did not function for multiple reasons: (a) I came to the circle with a previously planned agenda for the research; (b) I felt a sense of responsibility to the people I had called together; and (c) I sensed that time was too limited to experiment with the surrender of my research goals. Most of the co-participants expressed that they were not interested in designing or leading any part of the research project, and were happy to be led in the process. I hosted and led the remainder of the meetings.

This research project remains a co-creation, however. My collaborators include, but are not limited to: (a) an insightful academic supervisor; (b) a compassionate and generous life partner whose financial support has permitted me to focus primarily on this research project; (c) a loyal dog who requires daily walks in the fresh air; (d) the inspiring forest that surrounds my home; (e) creative and thoughtful friends; (f) the co-participants; (g) the magic found in second-hand book stores; (h) the external landscapes I explored as I reflected on and wrote my research proposal and thesis; (i) the past conflict I experienced with parents of students whom
I’ve taught; and (j) the mental peace I found during nine weeks of retreat at my parents’ homes in Sun City, Arizona and Toronto, Ontario. I know I’ve worked more in partnership than alone. I’ve even wondered if I’m not the recruited participant of some Higher Purpose.

**Recruitment and Selection of Co-participants**

Metaphorically, I began to prepare the soil (Clements, 2002, 2004) for the group research and the recruitment of co-participants months before the study commenced. Prior to leaving Jasper on October 30, 2011 for nine weeks at my parents’ homes, I met face-to-face with several people I thought might benefit from and add value to the study. Then, when the official recruitment began in December while I was still out of town, I sent out email and Facebook invitations to several of my friends and acquaintances (see Appendix A). I created a co-participant job description (see Appendix A) and gave it to those who expressed an interest in joining the research group. I also offered to call those who had questions.

My intention for all group members was that we be “equal, free, autonomous, loving and creative co-participant[s]” (Heron, 1996, p. 201). It was important that those involved with the study be self-reflective, willing to experience a daily practice of mindful meditation, and committed to their own personal growth. A significant amount of self-discipline is required for any practice, let alone one that has a tendency to heighten an awareness of our discomforts. I needed to trust that each of the group members would dedicate the extensive time and energy involved individually and as a collective.

The nature of the social relationships between the group members was crucial to our willingness to report our experiences with honesty and transparency. It was important that each group member be responsible for the cultivation of an authentic and trustworthy community. I looked for those who would be respectful of others’ confidences, and who would be willing to
take the risk of sharing personal information with near strangers. I needed everyone to “speak and behave in ways that [would be] perceived and received as trustworthy, respectful, competent, credible, [and] compelling” (Symonette, 2009, p. 293). Because the intention of our gatherings was research rather than group-therapy, I was selective in the recruitment and sought people who I believed to be mature, balanced in mind and body, and committed to their health and healing in the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual realms. Though I knew all of the participants in varying degrees prior to beginning the study, some of them came to the experience having never met each other.

**Research Participants**

When I returned home in mid January, 2012, six participants, including myself, had confirmed their commitment to the project. I had hoped for six to eight people, so I was set to begin the research group on time. Though nine people attended the information meeting I held prior to beginning the research, eight of us returned the following week.

The co-participants were recruited from a population base of 4,500 in the community of Jasper, Alberta. Many people choose to live in Jasper, a town within a national park in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, for the healthy, outdoor lifestyle. Considering the town’s status amongst the top three in Alberta for cost of living (Government of Alberta, 2010), and the lack of high paying career opportunities, it seems that many Jasper residents have chosen priorities other than high powered careers and large bank accounts. In my experience, Jasper tends to attract people with an adventurous spirit who seek solace in the peace and quiet of the wilderness, as well as those who seek the lifestyle of a constant vacation.
Of the original eight group members, one dropped out after three meetings. Six co-participants attended at least eight of the nine two-hour, weekly meetings while two of us were present for all nine meetings. Six women and one man completed the full study.

We ranged in ages from 19-60. I mention our approximate ages not to label but to point out the years of experience we’ve each had. We originate from across Canada, except for the youngest participant, Alicia, who is from Germany. Our first languages are English, French, and German. I address the primary languages we speak because English, the language that we predominantly used during the research meetings, did become a barrier for expression. This barrier was overcome by having people in the circle who are bilingual, including myself. When Marie-Hélène felt she needed to speak in French, several of us understood and could translate for those who didn’t. I translated any French into English for the transcriptions, and I was also able to understand any journal entries written in French.

Aside from Patrick and me, those in the group research did not have experience in mindfulness per se, though everyone had engaged in some form of self-reflective practice. Patrick came to the circle with considerable experience in mindfulness: he has practiced on and off for years, facilitates an evening meditation group for his work, and following our collective research, he participated in a three-week silent meditation retreat.

As I wrote the following co-participant introductions, I realised that it was presumptuous and somewhat patriarchal of me to judge what each person thinks is important for me to share about them. So, I sent each of them an email with an invitation to alter or accept what I had written to ensure the “depth and accuracy of affected content” (Langer & Furman, 2004, sec. 4.2, para. 2). For those who responded, I’ve integrated their offerings into the text. One participant
told me to write what I wanted as she trusted me, and that was why she joined the study in the first place.

Alicia is not quite twenty. She is from Germany. Her first language is German but she is very adept with the English language. She works in the tourism industry as front line staff. She came to Canada in the fall of 2011, prior to the start of the research, to work and to reflect on what she wants to study in university. I met her on her first full day in Jasper when we were both volunteering at an event for the environmental group, The Friends of Jasper National Park. When I told her about my research, she was interested to hear more. We became friends on Facebook and I sent her an invitation to participate in the group study. She came to seven of the nine meetings, missing two circles for a new job she started.

Grace is from Toronto but has lived in Jasper for about fifteen years. She is in her forties. She first came to Jasper, with her husband at the time, to perform historical theatre and song. She teaches drama, singing, and piano. Her first language is English, though she understands German. Her daughter, Julianne, now sixteen years old, is the young person I mentioned in Chapter One, who is on the severe end of the autism spectrum. I first met Grace through my work with Julianne, a decade ago. Grace also has a son, Griffin, who is in his third year of University. She lives in a house with eight other people (including Marie-Hélène, another co-participant). The house has one bathroom. Grace is likely the most patient, forgiving, insightful, and persistent woman I’ve ever met; she comes by her name honestly. She had done a lot of previous work on healing her own unproductive beliefs. It was through our work together with Julianne, that Grace and I learned to “dialogue” (http://www.autismtreatmentcenter.org/), a technique used to illuminate and question hidden beliefs. Grace was committed to the research
from the start and came to eight of nine meetings, only missing one for an out-of-town commitment.

Marie-Hélène is from French-speaking Québec. After living the life of a nomad, and sharing her incredible talent for social engagement theatre in the streets of the Antilles and Latin America for sixteen years, Marie followed the signs from a Sentient Cosmos, and found herself in Jasper. Though she originally intended to visit for two days, this has lengthened into a two year experience. While she is very proficient in English, language did become a barrier for her in the circle. Because she is incredibly gifted in the arts, specifically theatre but also in dance, music, and drawing, she often chose to express her ideas through these methods. Marie- Hélène is in her late thirties, and is employed by the Francophone play-school, and as a cultural coordinator in our community. I met Marie through our work together at the Francophone school and I have known her since she arrived. It hadn’t occurred to me to invite her to the group until we were driving together to an out-of-town party a couple of weeks prior to the start of the research. She agreed to participate almost immediately and came to eight of nine meetings, again only missing one night for an out-of-town work engagement.

Paula is a mother of two young girls. She is in her late thirties, and is an educator at one of the local schools. She also teaches private piano lessons. She home schools her oldest daughter, who is in Grade One. Her first language is English though she is bilingual in French. Paula is creative, and generous. She is waiting for a “great teacher” (P. Klassen, personal communication, June 11, 2012), a mentor to guide her in her spiritual journey. She recently mentioned that she is beginning to recognize that this teacher may be herself. She has been deeply impacted by her experience of living in Rwanda following the genocide. We have been acquaintances in the same social circles for about a decade and became friends over the past two
years. She was a great teacher and mirror for me during the process of our research group, an experience that I feel has deepened our friendship. Paula came to eight of the nine meetings, missing only one session for an out-of-town conference.

Paulette is a gifted writer and poet, a mother of a young adult, a junior high school teacher, and life partner of an elementary school principal. She is English/French bilingual, though her habitual language is English. She has recently entered her fifties and has a wickedly dry and witty sense of humour. Her students love her. She is raw and authentic; what you see is what you get. She burns incense and has skeletons hanging in her classroom to remind her to get to “the bare bones” (P. Blanchette-Dubé, personal communication, June 7, 2012). She regularly finds love notes from the Universe while walking on the local trails and she has a delightful habit of offering meaningful treasures to others. I have received several gifts from her, the most valuable being her time. She came to all nine meetings.

Patrick is a soft-spoken gift to our community. He donates his time to the local food bank and is employed by our municipality as an outreach worker for marginalized adults. He started and has successfully managed a decade’s worth of community dinners during Jasper’s winters. These dinners attract upwards of 400-500 people in an evening and are especially beneficial for the young adults who work for minimum wage at the ski hill, and for cross-generational conversations. He is excellent at what he does, yet the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual illness of those he works with takes its toll. I first met him a decade ago when he first moved to town, and came into the adult learning centre where I worked. I liked him immediately. He has lived an adventurous life and his stories are always thoughtful and meaningful. He refers to nearing his sixties. He came to all but the last meeting due to the death of one of his clients.
The final participant is me. I am passionate about the land and its healing effects on my relationships with self and others—human and other-than-human. I’ve worked as a wilderness guide and an educator for the past fifteen of my forty years. I am grateful to be bilingual in English and French, especially when it assists me to reduce barriers toward a sense of belonging. My great passion is learning the language of the land.

**Research Procedure**

As with the spirals I shared in Chapter Two (see Figure 2.1), the research procedure emerged as three interconnected investigations: a text study, a four-month personal study, and a two-month group study of which I was a part. Though the entire study lasted a total of six months, I can’t truly determine start or end dates. The ground was prepared for the study long before it began. Similarly, the outcomes, including enriched communication and relationships, continue to flourish today, months after the end of the officially documented study. My personal journey of inner transformation also continues, and writing this thesis has been integral to the process. I’ve created a summary of the methods that were adopted and a timeline for the three areas of the study (see Appendix F).

**Text study.**

As discussed in Chapter Two, my literature review involved three main subject areas: (a) mindfulness, (b) the origins of our cultural assumptions and beliefs, and (c) neuroscience. As I dove into the research process, the selection of texts I had initially proposed for my literature review changed slightly. I became aware of different sources as they appeared in bookstores, conversations with strangers, online podcasts, email advertisements, or gifts. If the title and topic of a resource resonated with the research questions I was asking, I took it as a communication from my partnership with Spirit that I was meant to explore the text.
As I engaged with the literature, I kept a Text Study Journal where I recorded key phrases and their page numbers, personal reflections, and summative notes. While reading, watching, or listening to a text, I kept the research questions in mind and chose to highlight passages that resonated with them. I used several of these excerpts at the group study sessions, for theoretical support throughout this paper, and for my personal reference and reflection. The personal reflections and summative notes were not consistently kept, however, and this made the writing phase of the research more challenging.

As I immersed myself in the literature, I participated in dialogue with friends and family about the ideas I was learning. By sharing my understanding verbally, I was better able to integrate, personalize, and synthesize the ideas. Through engagement in dialogue, I was able to gauge how others interpreted and experienced the concepts that I discovered during the research and I also deepened my own understanding. These conversations continue today and demonstrate that the outcomes of the research are neither static nor limited to the pages of this thesis.

Once my research and interpretation were complete, I came across several resources that supported my comprehension of the information I had gathered (Chodrin, 2006; Chodrin, 2008; Shadyac, 2011). Anderson (2000) refers to this validation procedure as “sympathetic resonance” (par. 13).

If I were to repeat the study, I would keep better summative notes of the texts and perhaps document summaries of the above-mentioned conversations about the texts.

**Personal study.**

During a six month period, I carried out a personal, experiential exploration of the research questions. The last two months were also a part of the group study. To focus my
intention, I wrote and posted the research questions in my journal and on my bedside table until I knew them by heart. To clear a creative space for my personal explorations and discoveries, I:
(a) maintained a practice in mindfulness for 30-45 minutes per day, at least 6 days per week;
(b) wrote for an average of ten minutes per day in an Experience Journal; (c) nourished my body with whole and nutritious foods, and minimized processed foods including sugar; (d) participated in regular outdoor exercise three to four times per week; and (e) practiced gratitude regularly.

While I officially began the personal study at the beginning of October of 2011, I started to introduce some of the methods into my life in September. At the time, I was beginning a year-long leave of absence from my job as a school teacher, had no idea how I would pay my bills, and was still unclear about the direction of this research. I symbolically left all that I had known behind me and headed out on a solo, three-week, five-thousand kilometre road trip to south-western Colorado. It was during this time that I began to: (a) explore, question, and foster my beliefs about belonging; (b) practice a routine of mindful meditation; and (c) write in my journal.

I spent the first four weeks of my personal study at home in Jasper. Then, on October 31st, I drove south with my step-mom, Sandy, and stayed with her for six weeks in a gated, adult community in Sun City, Arizona. On December 15th, I flew to stay with my mom and her husband, Greg, in Toronto for four weeks. I returned to Jasper in the middle of January, and was there until the end of the group research. I mention these places because they informed the experiences I wrote about in my Experience Journal—described below—and the summative poems that emerged from my journal entries.

On October 1, 2011, I began a daily meditation practice by listening to Kabat-Zinn’s (2002) eight-week, guided, Mindfulness Based Stress-Reduction (MBSR) program. This consisted of listening to a forty-five minute recording for at least six days per week. For the first
two weeks, I practiced a sitting meditation. The next two weeks were spent practicing a body scan, then two weeks of body yoga, and finally, two weeks mixing the three methods. Following the eight weeks of guided meditation for forty-five minutes per day, I continued daily with a thirty minute sitting meditation for the next two months, and an occasional yoga practice or a body scan. For the final two months of the personal study, I followed the same routine as my co-participants, which I describe in the next section.

During the six month period, I kept an Experience Journal in which I documented dreams, emotions, discomforts, thought or behaviour patterns, encounters, synchronicities, and any experience I felt was relevant to the research questions. Once a month, until the start of the group study, I used simplified coding strategies from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) to analyse and review my journal entries. I highlighted key words and phrases in my Experience Journal, and then clumped the words and phrases into groups to capture arising themes.

At the end of each month of personal study, I used the above mentioned themes and original text from my journal entries to create a summative piece of free-verse poetry (see Appendix E). This method “can be understood as data about the human experience in compressed form” (Langer & Furman, 2004, sec. 2, para. 1). Leavy (2009) suggests that “poetry as a research strategy challenges the fact-fiction dichotomy and offers a form for the evocative presentation of data” (p. 63). To complement the poems, I included several photographs that I took during the same time periods. Once the group study began, I went through the same process described above, but did so weekly rather than monthly. I found the weekly process to be far less complicated and time consuming.

While I made every effort to maintain a reasonably healthy diet, my study extended over the Christmas holiday, and I indulged in sugary, processed foods more than I typically do.
Following Christmas, during the time of the eight week group session, I followed two Wildrose cleanses, the Detox and the liver detoxification (http://www.wildrosecleanse.org/). This involved eliminating all sugars, flours, and dairy from my diet.

I have been a lacto-ovo vegetarian for more than twenty years and find it important to mention this. Though I can accept that some humans potentially need meat in their diet, I am of the belief that a meat-less – meat equals anything with a face – diet has offered me an opportunity to have less of an impact on the land that sustains me. Because I believe that what I ingest becomes a part of me, and affects how I am able to relate with my inner and outer environments, I do my best to consume consciously.

My exercise program varied depending on my geographical location and the weather. I started a running program while I was in Arizona but it tapered off in Toronto, where it rained and snowed. When I got back to minus twenty degree temperatures in Jasper, my running practice ended completely. However, I did walk with my dog, Beans, for at least fifteen minutes, and frequently for thirty minutes or more, twice a day. There were only a handful of days when I did not get outside for at least a short walk.

I kept a record of my research process in my Experience Journal and labelled it as “process” in the margins. In this way, I attempted to be transparent with my biases and assumptions as they arose, how the research evolved and was adapted, as well as other aspects related to the research process. So that I might enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the investigation, I did my best to document “perceptual, conceptual, and interpretive orientations and experiences [I] bring that exert critical influences on the research process” (Symonette, 2009, p. 281).
Community of practice.

I refer to the group study as a community of practice because it involved the co-participants learning and researching together. We gathered over a period of eight weeks for a total of nine sessions, including the introductory evening. We met in a central, comfortable, and confidential setting. I hosted an introduction meeting on Wednesday, January 25, 2012. Following this, we met on Wednesday evenings from February 1 until March 21, 2012. Our meetings began at seven o’clock in the evening and ended two hours later at nine o’clock. Sometimes our meetings went over-time but for the most part we respected the time limits we had committed to. I sense it was important to the commitment of the group that we honour the original time agreements.

Weekly meetings.

A week prior to beginning the official research meetings, I hosted the group in a discussion about the proposed design of the research. For this initial meeting, I asked each co-participant to bring a physical object that represented his or her intention for participation in the research. After we discussed the individual and collective intentions of the research, we left the symbolic items in the centre of the circle for the duration of each meeting (see Figure 3.1).

At the introductory meeting, I presented a handout (see Appendix C) that contained the research questions, information about mindfulness, instructions for the Experience Journals, a proposed agenda for the meetings, and guidelines for calling a circle. I asked the group members to post the three main research questions in visibly prominent places where they would be reminded frequently of our specific inquiry. Though I handed out printed copies of the questions, some co-participants shortened the questions, or rewrote them in their own words before posting.
Each group member was given an Experience Journal and asked to record: (a) their daily mindfulness practice and any other choice of practice(s) from the list outlined in the job description (see Appendix A), including exercise, and food choices; (b) how often and for how long they engaged in the practice(s); and (c) experiences they felt were connected with the research questions.

When I read the Experience Journals following the study, I noticed few recorded practices beyond a daily meditation. If the co-participants had adopted any others, they did not record them. This additional monitoring may have been too much to ask of them. Based on the discussion at the group meetings, I trust each person practiced a daily meditation but I never asked them directly.

As a guide to help with effective journaling, I offered them Van Manen’s (1990) “suggestions for producing a lived-experience description” (pp. 64-65). I did this with the
intention of keeping our journal entries relevant to the research. Van Manen proposes that we describe an experience as it was lived and avoid “causal explanations, generalizations, or abstract interpretations” (p. 64). I encouraged the co-participants to focus particularly on examples that stood out for their “vividness” (p. 65). I asked them to “describe the experience from the inside...the feelings, the mood, the emotions, etc.” (p. 64). We avoided “trying to beautify...with fancy phrases or flowery terminology” (p. 65), and did our best to attend closely to our sense perceptions, such as what we saw, tasted, smelled, felt, and heard.

In our journals, we included arts-based entries (Leavy, 2009) as “presentations of insight about the focus of the inquiry” (Heron, 1996, p. 37). The use of these methods helps to “reject static or unitary meaning and instead reveal multiple meanings” (Leavy, 2009, p. 69). Art presents “a porthole [i]nto an experience, one that may be shared...or one that is new” (p. 68).

Four of us wrote regularly in our journals, while three did not. One of those who did not make regular entries still gave a written or other arts-based summary at our meetings, although this did not occur weekly. I used the journals to support the themes that emerged from the group meetings and from my personal research, so the inconsistency of those who did not use the Experience Journal did not significantly affect the findings.

We started and ended each meeting in ceremony, by lighting and blowing out candles that, along with our symbols of intention, held the centre of the circle. Aside from the initial information meeting and the experimental first weekly meeting, which Paula bravely volunteered to facilitate, we followed a basic schedule. Generally, the formula was as follows:

7:00 pm: open the circle with a participant check-in.

7:15 pm: mindfulness practice.

7:50 pm: snack, tea, stretch break.
8:00 pm: share, listen, and interpret.

9:00 pm: close the circle.

Participant check-in.

This was a time for circle members to fully arrive, and to honour and name the energies we each brought to the circle that evening. During this time, I invited the group members to set a personal intention for the evening and one for the week. We also shared a reading of a published poem or quote about mindfulness or belonging (see Appendix D). Occasionally, this reading was followed by a short discussion.

Mindfulness practice.

Each of us participated in a daily mindfulness practice throughout the eight weeks of the group study (with one day off per week if desired). After the check-in at the weekly meetings, we included time to learn and practice one of four mindfulness methods.

At the weekly meetings, I introduced four mindfulness practices, a new one every other week. I encouraged everyone to engage with the same method for two weeks until we explored the next practice, and then to adopt the newest one for the next two weeks. For the first and second week, we explored guided sitting meditation as described in Chapter Two. For the third and fourth week, we practiced a body scan (Kabat-Zinn, 2002), and for the fifth and sixth week, we practiced Tonglen meditation (Chodrin, 1997). Finally, in the seventh and eighth week, we learned the Buddhist tradition of loving kindness, or metta meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

If I were to do the research again, I might include only the sitting and body scan meditations. Though both Tonglen and metta meditation help us respond constructively to pain when it arises, they differ slightly from the practice of developing moment by moment mindful
awareness. However, the participants did express their gratitude for the variety of skills they learned, which have assisted them to live with greater presence.

To learn each method, we listened to and followed guided audio recordings during the group meetings. The sitting meditation has already been described. The body-scan technique involves focusing attention on your body in the present moment. It can begin at the tip of your toes and travel through to the crown of your head, or vice versa. Tonglen meditation is the Tibetan Buddhist practice of being present with and breathing in pain, our own or others, and breathing out that which we wish to experience in its place (Chodrin, 1997). The practice of loving kindness involves the repetition of several phrases that intend to deepen compassion for self and others. The phrases are often similar to or a variation of the following:

*May we be filled with loving kindness. May we be happy. May we be well.*

We began with fifteen minutes of sitting practice at the introductory meeting. During the following week, we each practiced for fifteen minutes per day on our own. At the next meeting, we added five minutes, and practiced for a minimum of twenty minutes per day for the subsequent week. We continued to add five minutes per week, to a total of a thirty minute practice per day.

*Share, listen, and interpret.*

During the week, we were to use our Experience Journals to record dreams, emotions, discomforts, patterns, encounters, or synchronicities relevant to the three research questions. Near the end of each week, and prior to our next gathering, we read through our journals, highlighted key words and phrases, and noted apparent themes in a summary. Though I continued to create a summative piece of poetry each week, other co-participants used various
methods such as drawings, paintings, maps, or a reading of a poignant entry from their journal, to capture and formulate their weekly summaries. For example:

*As I was reading through the journal entries, I would see a word or something, pattern, whatever, and so I just wrote them down so it’s almost like a word or a part of a sentence and then a dot.* (Paulette)

*I highlighted words and kinda a random selection. I don’t know why just as soon as I saw a word, I highlighted it because I gravitated towards it for some reason.* (Patrick)

The sharing circle was an opportunity for each co-participant to present their weekly summaries, which I asked for after each meeting. I audio recorded and transcribed each of their spoken summaries.

During the time dedicated to sharing, we used a feather as a talking stick. Only the person holding the feather spoke. As each group member shared, I invited the others to take notes with the intention of detecting themes across the participants’ experiences. Once everyone had a chance to present their summary of the prior week, we went around the circle again so that each person could offer an impression of the themes they had sensed.

Because I grossly underestimated the amount of time this process would take, the method we used for sharing required some experimentation. During the first gatherings, one group member shared his or her summary and then we went around the circle to discuss the themes of that one synopsis. When this occurred, we only heard the summaries of two or three people. Because this did not meet my research needs, which was to hear everyone’s summary each week, we experimented with a couple variations. During the fifth circle, we found a rhythm that permitted all of us to share our summaries in a first round of the circle and then to discuss the arising themes in a second, and sometimes third round.

---

Close the circle.

During the closing of each circle, I thanked the group members for their generous contribution of time. I read a free-verse poem or quote, about mindfulness or belonging, and then invited the group members to select a fairy oracle card (Virtue, 2008) or an animal medicine card (Sams & Carson, 1999). The purpose of these types of cards “lies in the wisdom and understanding of one’s role in the Great Mystery, and in honoring every living thing as a teacher” (Sams & Carson, 1999, p. 13). I blew out the candles to signal the completion of the circle at 9 pm.

For our final circle at the end of the study, I invited each member to bring an item to represent our time together. After describing the symbolism, we offered the item as a gift to the centre of the circle. Then, each co-participant was welcome to take one of the offerings away with them.

Following the community of practice, I collected the Experience Journals for review. I returned the journals, which I kept in a secure place in my personal home office, to their authors at a closing interview.

Understanding the Stories: Parts and Whole

We recall the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole...It is a circular relationship.

(Gadamer, 2004, p. 291)

To help me interpret the research findings, I integrated my findings from the literature review with the individual and collective stories I learned from the personal and group studies. Each narrative added value to my understanding of the whole, which in turn added strength to my comprehension of the individual stories. While I have done my best to consider multiple
perspectives, as the primary researcher and writer of this study, all of the information has been filtered through my beliefs, my mind, and my ways of knowing.

Because the amount of material generated was far more than I could interpret within the allotted time frame, I focused on the information from the group meetings. This included the weekly summaries and my summative poems. As I read through the hard copy of the transcribed group meetings, I kept the three primary research questions in mind. When I made sense of an idea within the transcription, I made one to three word notes along the margins. I call these labels. After working through a couple of the transcriptions, I began to produce several “consistent patterns or clusters of ideas” (Anderson, 2000, par. 25) with these labels. Once I completed the first read through and labelled the ideas contained within, I began to draw maps of the concepts that emerged. I followed a similar procedure with the weekly summaries and then with my summative poems.

Following this, I “retreat[ed] from the intense, concentrated focus on the question” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28) for twelve days in what Anderson (2000) describes as an “incubation period” (p. 12). During this time, my partner, Dave, treated me to a holiday in Mexico, where I swam, walked, and thoroughly enjoyed the warmth. While I maintained a mindfulness practice during the trip, and read one book related to the study, I did what I could to allow the research information to simmer rather than focus intensely on it.

Following my time away, I read through the transcripts again without looking at the original labels I had written. I came up with new one to three word labels, and compared these with those I’d formulated earlier. Then, I either revised or affirmed the original labels.

I entered all of the labels into a Microsoft Word table and deleted any duplicates. I printed the document, cut out each label, and spread them out on my kitchen table. I moved the
labels around and watched as they seemed to sort themselves into one of several clustered
categories. I taped these clusters into a scrapbook, allowed the information to incubate again,
and then I repeated the process of cutting out and organizing the labels without looking at the
earlier results. This method was inspired by magnetic poetry; single magnetic words that can be
moved around to create poems.

Once the labels were in their clusters for a second time, I taped them to a large piece of
paper and compared them with the first clusters. I used a pen to draw arrows and symbols, to
write, and to explain the emergent themes and the stories that connected them. This method
created a type of map that documented the metaphorical landscape we explored during the group
research. I documented the emergent themes, as well as a summary of how the themes relate to
each other, on yet another large piece of paper.

I checked to see if the themes I formulated from the transcriptions made sense with the
co-participants’ summaries and my summative poems. Finally, I compared the themes with my
understanding of the literature review, and a scan of the Personal Experience Journals.
Throughout the process, I used embodied resonance (Anderson, 2000) as a “meter for gauging
when the cycles of interpretation [were] complete” (Wells & Curry, 2006, p. 82). Eventually, an
understanding of the overall themes and story arose.

Once the interpretation was complete – although it will never be “complete” as there are
multiple meanings – I drafted a summary of the themes and how each relates to the others. I then
sent the summary to the group for validation and feedback, which I solicited at a closing
interview with each person.

During the closing interviews, I asked several semi-structured questions (see Appendix
G), gathered information about the co-participants’ experience with the research, and invited
them to express any emergent thoughts. All of the group members agreed with the interpretations and summaries I presented. Through the interview, which I audio recorded, I was able to witness how each person found their own meaning in the research process. The research outcomes have taken on a life of their own, and to this day, the other group members share stories about how the research has influenced their lives.

I am reminded of the Indian story about the blind monks who are put into a room with an elephant and after touching it, are asked to describe aloud what is in the room with them. One monk, who has the tail in his hands, states that the object is a rope. Another monk, with the elephant’s ear in his hands, disagrees and says it’s a fan. A third monk has one of the elephant’s legs between his hands and laughs at the other two for not recognizing that it is a tree. In the research, we were unlike the monks in that we saw the larger picture, but we were like the monks with our individual experience.

Though I had intended to synthesize the experiences of the study with “an aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meanings” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 52) in a script for a play, this has not yet occurred.

To help me process the complexity of the study, and engage with the “four windows of knowing,” including feeling, imagining, sensing, and thinking (Gallegos, 1991), I maintained a practice of mindfulness throughout the research and writing process. I experienced several visions during my meditations (see Figure 2.1 in Chapter Two and 4.1 in Chapter Four), which I drew or painted in a scrapbook. Unfortunately, none of my depictions are as intricate and perfect as they were in my mind. By reflecting on these visions, I found they often assisted me in my understanding and integration of the information.
A Summary of the Overall Story Collection

The samples of hard data from this research include:

- The contents of my Text Journal from the literature review.
- My Experience Journal, which includes summative poems, drawings and photographs that capture the essence of my experience with the research questions.
- Audio recordings of the eight sharing circles from the community of practice.
- The printed transcriptions of the meetings with analysis markings that label emergent themes.
- A Word document with a list of the emergent themes.
- Several scrapbook pages of clumped themes. These pages also contain drawings and written explanations to demonstrate the reasoning behind the organization of the themes.
- The co-participants’ Experience Journals including drawings, paintings, and poetry.
- Video recordings of dance and drama presentations that represent entries into the Experience Journals.
- A digital folder on my computer for each co-participant, with any correspondence I shared with them throughout the research.
- A Facebook page with research relevant postings that were shared amongst participants.
- A written summary of the themes that I sensed and sent to the co-participants for verification.
• Audio recordings of my closing interviews with each of the co-participants.

Chapter Summary

The research project was designed to give voice to multiple perspectives through multiple ways of knowing. I have not sought definitive results.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

Every ‘particle’ in the universe is a thread in the cosmic tapestry—each one woven by all the others. If we attempt to pull out a thread for close examination, we find the rest of the tapestry beginning to fray, and the pattern as a whole becomes incoherent. The universe must be considered as a whole, otherwise it loses meaning. (de Quincey, 2002, p. 74)

While I have categorized several themes from the information I collected during my study, I am hesitant to label them as separate ideas, or to suggest the evidence indicates one theme or another. Rather, the themes blend into each other. When this becomes obvious, and the evidence supports more than one theme, I may or may not point it out. I trust that by now, my readers comprehend my conviction that individual experiences cannot be considered separately from the whole. While the themes may be distinct, they are not separate from one another.

As I read through the transcriptions of the circle discussions, I began to distinguish several interconnected themes. These concepts were supported by the personal research, the Experience Journals, and the literature. While the co-participants and I placed our focus on how a practice of mindfulness, an investigation of current assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of beliefs of belonging affect our relationships, we seemed to experience a greater awareness of the ideas described in this chapter. It may be that a practice of mindfulness has helped us to become more aware of the following thematic concepts that infuse our everyday lives but are most often taken for granted. I have used bold and italicized font to highlight the themes in the paragraphs below.
With a practice of mindfulness, there is a greater awareness of our relationships and communication. We became more conscious not only of our connections with self, other humans, and other-than-humans, but also of the complexity of communication that occurs within ourselves, as well as with and amongst those with whom we are in relationship. Sometimes these relationships and communications are obvious, while other times, they are not. It may be that a practice of mindfulness, or perhaps any spiritual practice, makes the inapparent apparent. Perhaps our sense receptors open wider or become more sensitive, and are thus able to detect that which was not previously perceptible.

In addition to a practice of mindfulness, when we simultaneously investigate current assumptions and beliefs, and foster beliefs of belonging, we may discover underlying assumptions and beliefs about sensation and identity. With a practice of mindfulness, a period of awareness arises between our experiences and how we respond to them. Habitual, reactive patterns are interrupted. In this time and space, we are better able to excavate and explore the possible origins of our current assumptions and beliefs, and to foster new beliefs. Through this process, we are presented with an opportunity to let go of old stories that many of us have spent a lifetime gathering support for. This letting go, though potentially uncomfortable, provides the opportunity for the intentional creation of new stories about how we relate and communicate with self and others, both human and other-than-human.

The last of seven themes involves coyote, a member of the other-than-human world who also exists as a mythical trickster, a human construct. Coyote may act as a bridge between wild nature and human nature; two worlds that are distinct but not separate. Coyote appeared many times throughout the study, symbolically, physically, and in discussion.
To support the thematic concepts, I’ve provided storied evidence from the perspectives of the personal and group research: (a) *I am*, the individual perspective from my personal study; and (b) *we are*, the collective perspective from the group study. Some of the stories reveal facts about the objective, outer world, while others tell about the subjective, inner world.

I have followed each of the co-participants’ stories with a name, and at which circle the story was shared. Some of the stories were taken from the weekly summaries shared in circle, while others are from the conversations we shared about these synopses. If there is no name, it is my story. Some of my accounts have been taken from my Experience Journal or my summative poems; they are labelled with a month or the circle when they were shared.

**Relationships: As Within, As Without**

The interconnectedness of life emerged as a central idea discussed in the circle. It seems that the practice of mindfulness permits us to become more aware of our connections with others. Some relationships are apparent, such as those with our family members, while some are less apparent, such as those with an All-Encompassing Energy, or Creator. Often, our relationships with others reveal aspects of the relationship we have with ourselves.

**I am community.**

*The work I’m doing is deepening my affection and respect.*

*I wonder if my chest feels tight because my heart is growing.* (January 2012)

Through the research, I experienced a shift towards a deeper awareness and appreciation for the relationships in my life and for the community that envelops me. This outcome may be related to a daily practice of mindfulness, a result of prioritizing the research and taking the year away from other work, a shift in my beliefs about and my response to belonging and discomfort, an integration of several of these components, or something else completely.
The relationship I gained the greatest awareness of is the one I have with myself. I devoted time and energy to my mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical health. In addition to a mindful practice, I practiced listening to how my body communicates with me, and to the voice of inner guidance.

I believe it was through deepening the relationship with myself that I also sensed significant healthy shifts in my relationships with others. As I practiced presence, the simple joys I experience in my relationships became more apparent, and my gratitude deepened. Such joys include the contrast of crisp mountain air and the warm sun on my skin as I bring my dog her breakfast on the porch; a dialogue with my father about death, as a November Arizona breeze blew across my skin while on an evening stroll; or, the warmth of my partner, Dave, when I cuddle my cold feet up to him after a long night of writing. Even when conflict and grief arose, I found myself able to step gently into it and to practice presence with the discomfort rather than attempt to fix or change those I’m in relationship with. Mind you, I’ll likely require a lifetime of practice with this.

Beans, my dog, (see Figure 4.1) became a prominent part of my daily experience. Because I wrote from home, she was my primary social contact throughout the research and writing phases of this project. She acted as a mirror for me to check my avoidance and rescue reactions to another’s pain. Early on, I found myself trying to fix and rescue Beans from her declining mobility and health. A pattern of resistance to grief and pain became more apparent to me during the early days of the research, and I used my relationship with Beans to explore and work through some beliefs about suffering and death. Now, near the end of the thesis journey, Beans’ health has mysteriously improved, although she snores horrendously thus interrupting my
writing. She continues to provide me with opportunities to be mindful of my anger, however, especially when I feel as though she intentionally ignores or disobeys me.

One day, when Beans was off-leash, a coyote crossed our path. It was only a grey streak across my field of vision but Beans bolted down the path after it, barking madly.

*An energy flowed through me.*

*I passed fire through my throat like a dragon.*

*I realised after how loud I'd yelled.* (First circle)

*They don’t do what I ask.*

*I get angry.*

*I tighten and grasp at control.* (First circle)

Through my relationship with Beans, I was able to reflect on how I react when I perceive that my guidance or authority is ignored, a sensation frequently triggered in my role as a teacher. While I have typically imagined it as a lack of respect when my students appear to ignore or disobey me, I’m not convinced that a dog is capable of disrespect. I began to recognize that the sensation of being disrespected was based on complex connections, including those between another’s choices and my assumptions about the intention of these choices. I decided to explore this further.

While I intentionally make an effort to leave others the freedom to discover their own path, I’ve come to recognize, especially when I am in a position of authority, that I fixate a part of my identity on my ability to keep another from harm or to ensure their success. I’ve believed that this aspect of my identity is strengthened when my guidance is accepted; my authority is accepted and respected. When I sense my direction is ignored, I’ve felt unheard and believed my identity as an authority is threatened. By exposing these assumptions, I’m able to be mindful of
them; I can choose if I wish to react or respond to the circumstances that trigger them. Sometimes, another’s behaviour actually has little or nothing to do with me.

In addition to providing me with physical exercise, my two daily walks with Beans permitted me the opportunity to deepen my relationship with and to learn more about the cycles and languages of the other-than-human members of my community, including the birds, the plants, and various manifestations of water.

_Hoar frost crystals_,

*Figure 4.1. Beans*
like little skinning tools.

Or diamonds glistening on a snowy blanket.

I stop to breathe.

Thin ice breaking.

The cold makes my breath visible.

Conscious.

Crunching snow. (Second circle)

Through the dedication of my work hours to the research, I used the time and space I’ve invested in my role as a teacher to connect with the community beyond the walls of the school. I walked, rode my bike, and visited with friends; I had energy to do so. I feel this shift in my sense of connection with the community is a strong statement about the pathology of the school system within which I worked, or at least about my relationship with that system. While working at the school, I felt that more and more of my time and energy, beyond what I could sustainably offer, were being expected of me. The experiences I’ve had this year with my community have been genuine treasures. I’ve pondered how I can maintain the space for similar connections once this thesis is complete and I go back to work for an income.

I experience my community by walking.

Friends. A listening ear.

Blue sky. It is crisp and sharp and clear.

I stop and gawk at the hoar frost.

Tingly feeling in my quads on a cold day.

Exciting. Invigorating.

A stronger sense of trust. (January 2012)
In the early part of the personal research, I spent more time in close proximity with my mom and step-mom than I have since I was a child in need of supervision. I stayed with my step-mom, Sandy, for six weeks at my dad’s and her home in Arizona. Then, I was with my mom, and her husband, Greg, for four weeks in Toronto. In total, I was nine weeks in settings that could have been fraught with angst and unhealed relationship issues. Though I occasionally sensed old identities being reactivated, I feel it was my mindful practice that permitted me to explore and even laugh about my triggers.

Though I was infrequently with other humans this year, both my wounds and my healthy traits were reflected back to me through my interactions with the world. I was reminded that we can always find someone or something to hold up the sacred mirror for us; a partnership that permits us to witness and embrace our wholeness. These experiences provide rich opportunities to explore the inner relationship with self, if we engage in the adventure.

The disembodied aspects of myself were mostly revealed through my frustration with pain, my own and others’. As I did with Beans, I resisted or attempted to fix any suffering I experienced personally or vicariously, and then felt irritated when I could not. I continue to experiment with the triggers of discomfort. I recognize that if I continue to respond to the triggers in similar ways, such as to avoid, give advice, or rescue those who won’t or can’t speak for themselves, I will experience the same stories. I have yet to embody a full acceptance of life’s discomforts, and I continue to practice my attentive listening skills prior to responding.

Though being present with pain is a weakness, the work I’ve done through this thesis has supported me to honour and explore my curiosity for life’s natural cycles of pain and pleasure. When I experienced the discomfort of anxiety for not meeting the thesis deadline, I was able to become curious about my sensations rather than ignore or push through them. As the original
deadline neared and I was not ready to submit, I experienced a distracting tightness and fluttering in my throat and upper chest. When I eventually listened to this discomfort, I was able to ask for a two month medical extension, which permitted the time and space that was needed for my thesis journey to continue naturally rather than be forced into completion.

A greater awareness of my less apparent relationships, such as my connection with Source – that which encompasses and flows through all that is – occurred during the personal research. Though I have gone through periods of discomfort, I feel supported. Despite my choice not to work for a traditional source of income, financial resources continue to be available. Because I cashed my registered retirement savings plan and received financial support from my family and my partner, Dave, I have been able to avoid going into debt over the past year. I could have used my bank account balance at the beginning of this adventure as an excuse to not take a leap of faith, but because I felt the fear and acted anyway, I’ve become more aware of my sacred relationship with Source. I have not felt a sense of need this year, though I admit that towards the end of this process, I feel my faith is being subtly tested. Overall, I have experienced what it is to be supported by my cells, my family and friends, and certainly by something larger than myself.

The only word God knows is Yes.

Laughter

Helping me to release my roles.

Coming home.

More time to be less structured. (Eighth circle)
We are community.

As a group of co-participants, we discussed how the multiple relationships that exist within ourselves, within the circle, as well those that ripple outward are interconnected and nested within other communities. With a general acceptance that communities are nested within each other, a sense of overall belonging seemed to arise amongst the circle members, both in and outside the circle.

On the inside...that’s the relationship I have with the environment and that’s the light...and so when I meditate, I think that’s what’s coming out. (Paulette, first circle)

If I accepted that I was a separate entity then there would be no chance to play a vital role in the greater whole. If I believe that I am whole, and at the same time a part of the greater whole, then it would be wise to offer up an unbroken me to the greater whole and influence the cosmos. (Patrick, third circle)

I feel connected to the community...[I] was very much like a weaver, like I was in and out and just connecting with people and getting this guidance to do this and then go there. (Grace, sixth circle)

Many threads tie me into the lives of others. I'm nourished in the circle. Share these places. Create. Peace. Positive. Rhythm. Smooth. Share acts of kindness and light. It's rippling beyond the Circle. I belong. She belongs. He belongs. It belongs. Feed others what you want to eat at the Round Table. (Kim, sixth circle)

I love the patience we have. I love the patience the circle exhibits and practices. (Patrick, seventh circle)

I’m quite excited to be back in the circle. It’s nice to be back. On the one hand, I’m a little bit excited to be back and on the other hand, I just feel comfortable. (Alicia, eighth circle)
Community not only exists within our bodies, but also extends beyond the obvious relationships we have with other humans, and includes our connections with other-than-humans. Some of these relationships are obvious, while others exist on a more subtle level. Not only do these relationships appear to transcend species, but also time and place.

[I] trust that people come and go and come back and go again and sometimes even come back again. And some we never see again and that too is okay....Maybe once we have been [through] an experience together we are really always together. (Grace, first circle)

...There’s some people you automatically just feel more comfortable with or there’s a certain base understanding...I remember walking into a room one time and this man looked at me and it felt like he had walked across and slapped me right in the face and I don’t know this guy from Adam....I effing hated him on sight as if he had already assaulted me and so he probably walked around for the longest time going, “What’s with her?” ‘cuz he’d walk in, I’d walk out...I’ve never had a visceral reaction to a human like that before....And then there’s some people you just sit down and you start talking and it’s like, “Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for you for so long!” It’s like you already know who that person is. (Paulette, second circle)

You and I, where’s the connection?...Our physical life has me seeing you as something separate...but there’s a deeper connection and something that may not be apparent to...the limiting view or repressive nature of our five senses....I think we are connected. That’s what I want to believe. And we just can’t understand how that connection manifests itself beyond, it might be beyond our understanding at the moment. Well, it’s beyond mine. (Patrick, third circle)

A lot of the colours and the sensations that I’m feeling or the pictures that I’m seeing, reminds me a lot of the way my grandmother used to heal and then everything was just like she
was laughing, like, “Ahhh. You come all this way to come right back. That’s nice.” (Paulette, sixth circle)

To speak to the connectedness of it all, every breath we take, we’re still breathing in the molecules of somebody like Julius Caesar’s last breath. Wrap your head around that one. (Patrick, seventh circle)

When I go in the forest, it’s a way to communicate with my ancestors too. And I met a lot with my grandfather because the last time I talk with him before he died...he told me...that he would love to be a little bird and how he would...observe me in different countries with different people because he was very curious person...and often I saw little bird and oh, that is my grandfather. And sometime the bird follow me long time so that is, sure, that’s my grandfather. Or with other animals too....I can feel community....I went to walk in the woods and...I need to give a big hug and this tree just look at me and oh, okay, so I give a big hug and he smell good, like when you smell, because [it] was spring....It was just like wow, it’s alive and I am alive. (Marie-Hélène, seventh circle)

I heard you talking about being alone and yet going to the forest...being a part of a larger community that’s not necessarily human. (Kim, seventh circle)

It just doesn’t even feel like it's the end really...it's kind of comforting in a way to know that there is no deadline, there’s no, like it's not the end of anything....It doesn't feel rushed or fake...but feels like really, really just a natural flow, water flow. (Paulette, eighth circle)

Though each of us arrived in the circle with our unique stories and constructs, an awareness of our similarities became apparent.

...How you can have a thought and everybody’s having the same thought? Somebody vocalizes and then everybody is like, “Yah! Yah! Right!”... And how that can happen in different
parts of the world, we all have experienced that where somebody phones you and you’re like,
“Oh yah, I was just thinking about you.” (Grace, second circle)

It’s just funny how whenever anybody starts talking, yah! Me too, I did that too!
(Paulette, third circle)

When we were talking about the commonalities between us last week...it was like, “Oh, I have nothing to say because that’s what I was going to say.” And that’s been happening since we started this stupid thing and here I am thinking, you know I have original thoughts. Apparently not. (Paulette, sixth circle)

As we became mindful of the connections we have with others, a need to be separate also arose. Many of us seemed to evaluate our relationships by asking which ones work for us, which ones need more or less of our attention, and if they require a different type of attention altogether. It seems as though boundaries between the self and others may be required to avoid overstimulation, and even to maintain a sense of sanity.

It’s like this mindfulness is helping me understand that it’s not a bad thing, that sometimes you need to have that space inside of yourself and to be alone and not be always covered with people all the time. It’s just like (exhale breathing sound), I seriously need my space and I don’t know if living in Jasper has sort of spoiled me because there’s always so much exterior space but I’m learning that I have to foster that on the inside too and not let so much come in all the time. (Paulette, third circle)

I don’t know how to balance that pain of others and pain that I experience, you know sometimes I get wrapped up in the pain of the families who pick tobacco in Malawi and the pain of the Congolese who experience the effects of our addiction to technology and those who grow
coffee and those who grow...cocoa beans. And I just feel really blessed, not only to live in Canada but to live in Jasper. (Kim, fourth circle)

I was totally present and it made me realise how I act towards certain people or just people and that made me feel worse because all of a sudden I was mindful of how shitty I was and before I was just like, “Oh yah.” We go through the day and you don’t even think about half of the relationships that you have or the connections that you have with people....As far as being connected to community, I think what I wanted to do too is just sort of pull back inside myself. I have too many relationships and too many opportunities to be shitty and bad so I was just pulling back inside myself. (Paulette, sixth circle)

For myself, I have to maintain too many relationships and I understand what you mean by backing off because it’s very tenuous you know, it’s like a huge cobweb, a spider web...and that’s how communities build....And the slightest mistake or sort of misstep, or the wrong thing said, could sort of shatter that whole cobweb of community. And sometimes it’s just too exhausting to keep everything going....I think that’s probably why I spend so much time at my house by myself after work and after other activities. I need as much time by myself as possible because it’s exhausting....This relationship business is really tenuous and it requires too much caution throughout the day to maintain them. (Patrick, sixth circle)

Relationships or community can break down when those who are a part of them do not complete the tasks required or expected of them, or when they begin to attack each other and the structures that surround them. Though some apparently antisocial behaviours – such as refusing to go to war or whistle-blowing on a corrupt leader – can serve to create desirable social change, they can also prove harmful. An organism that acts only for its own interests, while ignoring the
health of the whole, is considered pathological or parasitic. However, one could argue that even pathological living systems continue to serve the community with the task of population control.

**Communication is community in action**

From the research data, I found communication to be a second central theme. Community, which I labelled as relationship in the last section, and communication are etymologically linked. They both carry the Latin roots, commūnis and mūnia, which demonstrate sharing and duty, respectively. Community and communication can also: (a) be obvious or subtle, even virtually unapparent; (b) exist regardless of whether our mind/body is open or closed to a conscious experience of them; and (c) occur across species, time, and space.

**I am communication.**

While engaged in a regular mindful practice, I experience a greater capacity to listen, both to my inner voice and to those around me, human and other-than-human. I become more aware of how I relate with or respond to the communication of my body, mind, and others. Over the past several years in my role as a teacher, I often felt sucked into a vortex of busy-ness where I was so preoccupied that I couldn’t always hear the other voices of my community.

*The November sun gently kisses my skin.*

*Coyote strolls by and yawns as its lunch flutters away.*

*Hummingbird whirrs by my ear and reminds me*  

*To savour the sweetness of the present moment....*  

*A woodpecker called me outside at twilight.*

*My dreams are speaking to me again.* (November 2011)

*Startled awake.*  

*A force gently turns my focus toward the beauty,*
The Light of the present moment.

Raven at my door.

Fingertips pinched by imaginary clothes pins.

Snow allows me to see what she smells.

I see. I watch. I feel the Light.

Jay calls like a crank with cogs.

Beauty surrounds me.


Great joy. Contagious enthusiasm.

I'm in it now.


Beauty fills and surrounds me.

I have a choice. (Fifth circle)

During the research, I experienced several insights about my need to be heard. As I practiced listening to my inner world, I also became increasingly cognizant of when I do and don’t listen to myself and others, when others do and don’t listen, and when we, as humans, do and don’t listen to the land and the other-than-humans.

He interrupts me.

I look away and shut my interest off.

I tighten up.

An iron wall slams between us.

I harden like cold fat on a roasting pan.
I walk away.

Fuck it....

This time, I don’t leave. I notice.

I wait. I watch.

I open my heart and my mind.

Maybe he doesn’t hear that I’m speaking?

He tries so hard. (January 2012)

Through my increased awareness, I gained deeper insight into my barriers to communication, which often serve as impediments to my relationships. Though I find peace and joy in many of my interactions, I’m aware that I tire quickly of others’ grievances, especially when I feel I’ve heard the story multiple times. My response to repetitive pain is often to shut down my listening, either by rushing in to help or trudging onward while tuning out from my receptive senses. This is true for the reoccurring complaints I hear about others’ lives, and also for more global pains, such as the repetitive threat of climate change.

The fruit flies are in my house now.

Living in the past, resisting what "is" multiplies quickly.

Sucked in by the Sirens.

I saw the acid get passed around the circle,

A dumping ground. A safe haven.

Dragged along through pain and sorrow.

How not to absorb other people's stories. (Fifth circle)

I'm fed up with others' rotten garbage.

I can smell it as it enters.
This garbage dump is closed.

Take your shit elsewhere. (Sixth circle)

As I reluctantly practiced listening to others’ unhappiness, I began to wonder whether Creator ever feels annoyed with the numerous, repetitive complaints that I have. After all, how often do I listen to the voice of Spirit, a Source I believe always listens to me?

Where is my feather? Who is listening to me?

I cannot measure who my listener is...I must trust.

Give what you feel you lack.

I listened. I listened.

Who is listening to a Higher Energy?

Am I? (Fourth circle)

I questioned how often I listen to my inner voice. Though I didn’t recognize it at the time, I projected my doubts onto something Patrick shared during the second circle of the group research. When I reread the transcriptions of the group research, I saw how my response to Patrick had less to do with what he said and much to do with my own resistance to listening to the voice within.

So there’s this little inner battle with your inner wisdom and it feels like you’re telling it no that’s not what you’re supposed to do. (Second circle)

I continue to wonder where the balance is: how do I remain open to relationship and communication yet not allow the grief and unhappiness of others to overwhelm me? If we are all connected, does pain belong to anyone specifically, or is it everyone’s? A practice in mindfulness assists me to remain present and to observe and respond rather than react to my resistance to pain. I am conscious that I will need further training to maintain an open heart and
mind when it comes to listening to the hurts of the world, my own and others’. May the practice
I’m gifted with be kind and gentle.

Complaints. Busy!

I listen with a closed mind and heart.

I don’t want my energy to leak out.

Remember this avoidance.

Resistance to hearing another’s truth

Driving me.

Adjust the rearview.

I should check.

"The deeper the layers, the sweeter it gets," she told me. (Eighth circle)

We are communication.

My understanding of the information I gathered about communication during the group
research is that humans, other-than-humans, even the All Encompassing Divine, transmit and
receive information or energy along the immaterial connections that join us in relationship. For
humans at least, an open mind and heart seem integral to receiving, processing, and sending clear
information. The practice of mindfulness assists us with this openness and to be aware when we
are closed.

Through our relationships we share information with each other, and thus communicate
to co-create our experiences of the world. As with our relationships, sometimes communication
is apparent, and other times it is not.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a red fox up on the bank. And it just woke me up....It
was a really special experience...being aware that I was woken up by a fox. (Kim, third circle)
It’s uncanny, the communication between two people, not even body language, not even verbal language, it’s just the energy. (Patrick, sixth circle)

[Teenagers] can spot people who are feigning or people who are anxious, it’s like piranhas, they can smell the blood. And if they can smell that, so you have to be really, you know, really, really ready to be bounced off of all day long. (Paulette, sixth circle)

All this, nature and knocking tock-tock-tock, at the door to teach us something or ding! The elevator. Ding! Open your door and open new opportunities. (Marie-Hélène, eighth circle)

Anonymous or synchronistic communications, understood to be from an All-Encompassing Source, were received, interpreted, and shared in the circle. These mysterious messages came to be called Love Notes from Nature or Love Notes from the Universe by some of the group members (see Figure 4.2).

And when I was walking the trail today I found...a receipt....So this one actually came from a bookstore in Montana and it’s weird because my grandfather had a homestead in Montana before he came up here so I thought wow, Bing! And then it said, “Helping you find, grow, share and celebrate your faith.” (Paulette, second circle)

I just went to the bathroom, just before I arrive here, and the little plastic bag with this owl from Mac’s, was like that looking at me (shows a wink to the group – followed by group laughter) and I say oh, it’s just incredible, it’s everywhere. All it’s okay. I will be on time. (Marie-Hélène, fourth circle)

...This little guy...like the love coming out of this kid...so he gives me this huge hug and I was like oh my god like this kid just made my day cuz it was like he saw God....So it was just totally random. (Grace, seventh circle)
When we open ourselves to the communication of the inner and outer landscapes, we can expand our opportunities to learn and hear stories that might assist us to heal, recognize, and celebrate our wholeness and our belonging. Within the safe space of the circle, group members shared experiences that might not be accepted in all settings. Accounts that involved listening to the inner voice or to the other-than-human world were not uncommon during our meetings.

*Every night I would just try to send messages to the cougar that I am not your enemy. I am not the one you want. I’m not afraid of you. And that was it. And that went on for about three months. Never saw the cougar. I never even saw it on security but I knew it was there.*

(Patrick, fourth circle)

*And listening to when our bodies are telling us take a rest and I’m trying to be more mindful of that....When we start listening, when we start listening to flowers, when we start listening to crocuses saying come back home, and then I really feel that in the fall when the*
salmon come, it’s like it’s time to go back in the mountains....Can I just...make my life work so
that I can just leave? I’m still playing with that and it’s kind of an uncomfortable place to be
because I’m sharing this with you but if I were to...go around my staff room you know, well, ya
the crocuses have bloomed and I really need to take a week off work...I don’t think that would
necessarily be received in a good way....I can see this kind of hand action happening (does a
“she’s coo-coo” hand signal by her head) when I’m not looking. (Paula, sixth circle)

We knew that as kids! We knew that that place was already speaking to us and how many
other things did I forget? You know, and how many other things, maybe I didn’t forget but I just
chose not to listen to and so now I’m at this stage in my life where I’m okay, ya, crocus you have
something to say and I’m listening. There’s still that fear, okay so I’m moving in to this new way
of being that maybe I was more like when I was a kid, it’s just...how is it all going to fit together?
I think that I’m listening but taking action now and actually responding to the calls is, it’s a
tricky place to be and with two kids as well, like I’m just seeing that they get it and...that I have a
lot of power...and is it enough to say ya you know what, the land has something to teach us, let’s
let it speak, do I centralize that part of their learning? Do I make that more of a central part in
their learning? (Paula, sixth circle)

And nature helped me too this weekend at the solstice party. I thought about my father. I
say, okay I really want to do this work with my father and the flower that just come to me was
this daisy...I did not choose the flower, the flower chose me...was four beautiful daisies, white,
like my dad, my mom, my brother and me. The family. It was just too beautiful and with a lot of
love I look the flowers and I really feel in family with the flowers so I draw the flowers, the
daisies. So the nature teach[es] me a lot. (Marie-Hélène, eighth circle)
Our ability and willingness to communicate openly and to listen attentively appear to be interlinked with our assumptions about time. When we assume that time is limited our ability to communicate is often limited as well.

*The doctor told me to take pills and above all, not to do exercise. So, I went for my foot and she looked in my ears. I understand nothing. She speaks on the run and there’s not even time. I don’t listen to her.* (Marie-Hélène, sixth circle)

*To tame you really need to [release] control...don’t be afraid. To dance with the rhythm that we’ll make together. To don’t think that it's bad or it's dangerous. Take your time. Be sincere. Have a lot of love and try to find the common language.* (Marie-Hélène, eighth circle)

*Technology makes itself scarce in my home...Messages still comin’ down the line (knock knock sound). So this is how it works? I just come to your house to find you? Tock tock. You really need to get a phone. Tock tock. Sorry, I couldn’t give you a heads up BUT...tock tock. I just came for a hug and hello. Tock tock. I’ll come to you. Tock tock. People have been able to organize things before the telephone. Sending out reminders to everyone. No announcements. No formalities. No social niceties necessary. You are welcome here. No need to succumb to the cult of efficiency. Come as you are.* (Paula, eighth circle)

Sometimes, it is in the absence of noise that we hear a communication.

*It is silent. Her voice. Just want to hear her voice. Her voice. It is silent.* (Paula, first circle)

*One thing that struck me about the silence...when I decided not to turn anything on and I thought, oh silence and then I thought well no, this isn’t silence. The earth, the world is awake, you know, and living and breathing and that’s why I was saying it was really the absence of noise. My TV, the radio, the kettle boiling or water running or you know, always doing
something, so I stopped all that....Here I thought this was silence but it’s not, you know, because the world is happening around me so I started listening to the noises, just a little breeze in the trees or a bird, listening to the cold. (Patrick, fifth circle)

Silence is a very awkward thing to sit with and we’re just not comfortable with silence. But our silences here, I find comfortable and there’s a lot said in the silences. (Patrick, seventh circle)

I’m noticing all the delicious silences in our circle tonight and in my week in general just. Silence is a big thing. And as everybody was talking I was just really hearing the themes of connection, of relationships, sacred relationship and how often we can find them in the silences. (Paula, eighth circle)

As with relationships, the energy contained in communication can sometimes become too intense for us to bear. We create barriers to protect ourselves from being overwhelmed, often times this involves shutting down our listening or putting up metaphorical walls around us.

Then when you hear about all of this...I feel like I deal with it but just for a little amount of time because after that...it’s just...too much and I don’t want to...and then...I know that I have to shut my heart with that as well because I couldn’t deal with it. (Alicia, fourth circle)

Finally, because we co-create the matrix that connects us in community, the beliefs we choose to entertain, and the messages we communicate are important to consider because they affect others. It seems that communication is informational energy that is passed on and received by others.

I almost had a post-traumatic episode, you know. You just describing the migraine almost made me feel nauseous because those sensations are exactly what I experienced. (Patrick, second circle)
Sometimes I tell the truth just to get the person away from me or to shock them or to get them to wake up so just wondering if I can tell the truth, my truth, obviously it’s not the truth, but with compassion for the other person, for the other, for the relationships. (Kim, seventh circle)

**Underlying Assumptions and Beliefs about Sensation and Identity**

Another theme I deciphered from the findings is that underlying assumptions and beliefs about sensation and identity influence our experience of belonging. We have assumptions and beliefs about which sensations and identities do and don’t belong. All of the co-participants agreed that assumptions and beliefs are not fixed, and that by questioning the ones we hold, and fostering the ones we desire, we can experience a shift in our experience.

_Fostering heightens a belief and questioning breaks it down....I was thinking of beliefs and I just wanted to be sure about my beliefs and I’ve always felt that beliefs can change.....Beliefs aren’t fixed and I think I run into trouble when I fix my belief where it’s unwilling to change._ (Patrick, third circle)

_We don’t know the story and...if we just look underneath the surface we find out so many things that just change...everything that we believe._ (Alicia, fifth circle)

**Sensation.**

During both the individual and the group study, there was a greater awareness of pain, but also joy. It seems many of us have held the belief that we are to avoid pain; pain does not belong. It is easier to accept that joy belongs, and we can cultivate it through a practice of gratitude and an acceptance of the flow of life.
I sense.

Pain.

Through the personal research, I became more aware of my pain-trigging beliefs in scarcity. These beliefs include: I am not enough; I do not have enough; and the planet does not have enough. In the past, I have typically acted to fix or reduce the discomfort that is aroused by this belief by staying busy. I stay busy to appear important, and to make money so I can accumulate goods to demonstrate my value. Ironically, these behaviours support, rather than reduce, my suffering, busy-ness, and consumerism, all habits that fuel environmental harm.

Fear of ridicule, of not being _____ enough (fill in the blank).


Other ways seem easier and less painful. Avoid. Escape. Distract. I can't do anything to help. How do I accept the pain, my own and others’? (Third circle)

“Is there enough?

Enough time, money, health, safety, focus, inspiration, support....

Anxiety welling up.

Do you really believe you are supported and safe?” (Fourth circle)

Prior to and throughout the research, I experienced a deep, chronic physical pain in my shoulders and upper back, a partial result, I imagine, of being at the computer so often. Hay (1999) proposes that pain in this area is metaphysically connected with, though not caused by, feeling emotionally unsupported and carrying burdens. Though I’ve felt supported in many ways, I acknowledge the emotional armour I wear around my upper body that manifests as tight shoulders, fluttering sensations in my chest, and sore throats. I also have a tendency to take responsibility for much of the pain in the world that I become aware of. No battle is too large! I
notice that now, near the end of the thesis process and after several deep tissue massages, my shoulder pain has subsided.

*My neck is sore and tight.*

*Not feeling fed. Hungry.*

*Tired from being lazy.*

*Attacked. My shoulder aches.*

*Help me! Help me! Help me!* (Sixth circle)

During the research period, I found myself occasionally seeking to sabotage my sense of peace. One way I did this was to assume that I could change the opinions of those who disagree with my perspective.

*I want more outrage.*

*Chest tightens. Tightness. Throat closes.*

*Dizzy. Swirling energy.*

*I turn my attention back.*

*I’m sad because of how much I resist.*

*When I focus on negative, I feel negative.*

*I get wrapped up and I just keep going.* (January 2012)

*Joy and gratitude.*

Through the research, I have experienced more fully that joy is a sensation I can foster by expressing gratitude for the present moment. This joy, which I cultivate from within, is more reliable than an expectation that I be pleased by external circumstances or matter thought to offer pleasure and happiness.

*And gratitude fills my lungs.*
I remember I am safe. (November 2011)

**We sense.**

In the circle, we talked about our experiences of pain and discomfort, as well as our sensations of joy.

**Pain.**

*I had a lot of pain. Different pain...self pity, judging myself critically, too critical or maybe not critical enough. Trying to put things into the right perspective. Can’t do it. I’ll try again tomorrow...Disappointed in myself. Need to change and don’t know how.* (Alicia, second circle)

*Pain is pain. We all have experience with pain so when we suffer or we get a sensation such as a cramp when we’re sitting or your knee starts to twist, we immediately say, “Oh that’s pain.” And then we experience the pain because we’re identifying it. But really it’s a sensation in the body, it’s a body sensation. And probably the pain recognition goes back to the primitive reptilian brain. So I thought well if it’s just a feeling, why do I call it pain? Why can’t it be something else? Why can’t it be a more positive feeling like a gentle touch or a sensation not associated with being painful....If you feel any physical pain, look at it. Is it really painful or can you call it just another sensation? I think we’re too quick to say it’s painful when in actual fact it doesn’t have to be painful.* (Patrick, second circle)

*When I was performing...sometimes I would be sick and really ill, like shouldn’t have performed....And I was in such pain. I was like, okay, I’m doing it and what was really interesting...was I would get out there and within minutes...I was so present with what I was doing the pain was gone. And it would be gone for the entire show. And then sometimes after the show it would come back but sometimes it would be gone.* (Grace, second circle)
I know it’s pretty unusual but I could focus on nothing else just the breathing and this was so comforting for me because I knew if I would have a migraine, I breathe, I always breathe, I just keep on breathing and so I just can focus on that. It was like a tunnel, the pain was gone but everything as well was gone and I was, that’s again mind, how strong my mind can be.

(Alicia, second circle)

Our stories demonstrated a connection between physical and emotional pain.

A pain in the knee can drum up all sorts of old painful memories but that’s not the knee causing that. (Patrick, second circle)

I think I’m getting some physical stuff just because it’s almost jarring to be that free and then there’s no more, um, weight on you and that can be really disconcerting too, where you’re used to having pressure or a billion things going on and then suddenly that’s gone, and it’s like, it’s scary to be that, that free. (Paulette, second circle)

It seems as though there are several basic reactions to pain. We may ignore or fight the sensations that arise within us. We may numb ourselves with various substances or thrill-seeking behaviours in an attempt to flee from the sensations. Or we might find ourselves frozen, prevented from any further action. Typically, fight, flight, or freeze behaviours are triggered when we resist discomfort. However, we can also remain open, present with, and curious about our discomfort. This second choice, of becoming curious about sensations that arise in the present moment, allows for space in which we discover new responses.

When I feel angry, I feel a heaviness on my left side, probably where my heart is. My mouth kind of puckers and I want to almost close my eyes. I am focusing on my breath and working to stay in the present moment and not judge it as anything differently. I observe my anger rising. Biting the pen in my mouth. (Grace, sixth circle)
It was cool how you were looking for your diaphragm. And so you were looking at the actual physiology of your body and that was a huge thing that I saw when I was looking at mine. It honest to god looked like a camera going down, and I thought is this a vagina, no no no. And then I thought, my god, what am I doing? How am I doing that? But I needed to see what was going on inside as well. It wasn’t inside like a soul it was like my body and I saw, man it’s dark in there. (Paulette, second circle)

The group research demonstrated how a mindful practice seems to create time and space in which we may question our beliefs about pain and past reactions to it, and choose new responses.

Praying for someone else’s grief rather than resisting it...I had people coming to me all the time, lots of different people, pouring grief into my life. And I started resisting it and so to pray for that person’s healing [rather than close myself off from them] is something that I’d like to be able to do. (Kim, fifth circle)

Where we live right now, it’s such a small space, and you know, I’ll wake up so that I can have that, I can create that ambiance and I can get into that zone and Mat will often be up at that time too and he’s crunching away right behind me with his bowl of cereal (making crunching noises). You know, and I’m feeling things moving and sparks flying, I’m making that fire and just to stay in the breath and stay in the body and just accept what is happening around me and the only thing that I can really control is my reaction to it. But it’s easier said than done. (Paula, fourth circle)

One of these alternative responses is choosing not to label or avoid the uncomfortable sensations, even ones that may be painful.
For a couple of years, [Julianne] used to smear shit all over the house and um, the first time it happened was in the middle of the night, it was about 4 o’clock in the morning and her bedroom was across from ours and the smell of the feces was so strong that it woke me up....I literally woke up from the smell and I went over to her room, this was such a wild moment in my life, I’ll never forget it. I opened the door and I mean it was EVERYWHERE, like on the curtains, on the carpet, she was covered in it, on the bed, on the walls, like everywhere, like everywhere, and I was just neutral. Neutral. Like didn’t freak out. Didn’t laugh, didn’t cry, didn’t…it was just like acceptance. And it was interesting because for two years after that this would go on and I did freak out, or cry or I went through all kinds of different self-pity and I wanted to kill her numerous times and other times I would embrace the shit as if it was my own and thank her for it ‘cuz I learned to do a lot of dialoguing as a result of it which brought up my own shit...and it just ties into what we’ve been talking about tonight is that, mind, like just how our bodies can respond to a situation, um, we have options right? We have choices. (Grace, second circle)

This is my head exploding (See Figure 4.3). So that’s what it feels like when I was meditating. And this was the loving kindness and also it just felt like it was morphing and shifting and I’ve got this great big bloody egg head, and no pain. There’s no pain involved here at all but just how my head was moving and that I didn’t feel my hands. There was absolutely no feeling, so there are no hands there but I could see where there was colour all around me. (Paulette, fifth circle)
Joy and gratitude.

Sensations of joy appear to be connected with experiences that flow rather than with ones we attempt to capture or grasp at. When we learn to listen to our senses, we can even express gratitude for and sense joy during times of discomfort. Most often, our sensations of discomfort are an indication that circumstances in our inner or outer environments need some of our attention. In this light, discomfort can be a blessing. It may be that joy is an option in any circumstance should we (a) express gratitude for circumstances and the sensations they trigger, and (b) allow our sensations, including those of pain, to run their course.

Usually the life when I say oh I really like it, the day after I don’t have that anymore in my life. That happen all the time with the hat I love, the scarf and I laugh, it’s okay, that make space for other thing. (Marie-Hélène, fifth circle)

Sun is shining on my face into my heart. I need sun in my heart. Feeling good. Feeling a little bit of energy. The energy going through the whole of my whole body and then coming back
Identity.

Several categories of assumptions and beliefs about identity arose from the findings. These include those about: (a) the metaphorical masks we hold up to our own faces, and those we impose on others, and on the world; (b) belonging; and (c) separateness. Based on our beliefs, we have fixed ideas about how the world is, this includes ourselves, and how it/we should be. We imagine criteria to discern whom or what is separate and whom or what belongs. Rather than allow for the fluidity and ever-changing nature of all living systems, we tend to grasp at stories we’ve collected from the past and use them to support a fixed notion of identity, perhaps to create a sense of security. Tolle (1999, 2005) explains how we often hold on to our memories because they support our stories of identity. While it can be liberating, it can also be psychologically threatening to wonder who we are if not the stories we tell. Many of the myths we tell are not even ours to begin with but have been tacitly passed on to us through our culture.

My masks.

At the start of the personal study, I spent a lot of time dwelling in memories of relationships I experienced during my twenties. Though there is egoic pleasure derived from some of these stories, there is also a great deal of guilt and shame. As I practiced to sit with the pain of the past, I began to recognize that as I age and feel less physically desirable, I tighten my grasp on a time when I assumed my strong, youthful body was a source of power, one that I used to manipulate others. Ironically, I now see how I have also been manipulated by this assumption.

I am curious. Why don't I just let go?
What do I gain from

*Grasping at the past?...*

I remember I am safe,

*And I practice to release the grip I have*

*On an identity that may not be mine.* (November 2011)

*I replay what I could have said.*

*Is it the ego that seeks reparation?...*

“Nothing is to be clung to as I, me, or mine.”

*Buddha recommended.*

*Identity is entwined with the landscape.*

*I belong.*

*Feeling more compassion for the wounds.* (December 2011)

*I do forgive you, Kim. Healing.* (First circle)

If I let go of an old story (see Figure 4.4), one that is at the foundation of who I think I am, or who I think someone else is, I experience a shift in my world. These disruptions, while liberating, can also be disturbing; proper support and life skills may be required to help with the possible discomfort. Who am I without the stories that support my perceived identity? How will others react to me as a being with a fluid identity if I allow for a change? Will I be enough in the present if I let go of my past?

*What if I change my role?*

*Will they still be here?* (Fifth circle)

*Am I the alien?*

*More! More! More! Never more acceptance of what is.*
The tightness returns.

I'm not enough.

Not smart enough.

Not good enough. (December 2011)

Though I have been conscious for several years of the variety of masks I wear in different situations and with various people, I’ve become increasingly aware of the ones that I place on others and on the world. I affect my relationships when I carry forward these identities or masks that I’ve created based on my memories and on my desire to be seen a certain way. So often, I build a case to support the narratives that I project onto others, rather than experience a relationship in the present. While some scientists suggest that a memory is possibly recreated each time it is called up (Miller, 2010), my perception is that memories remain frozen in time.
They seem static, which may give them the power to appear real and accurate. Either way, I filter my present experiences through incomplete, and potentially reconstructed, snapshots of the past. Though events in the past may have shaped who I have become, I am not the events themselves, no matter how horrific or delightful I remember them to be.

_Taking off our masks._

_United we laugh._

_Comfortable, like an old friend._ (Second circle)

_We are not who others think we are or even who we think we are, there are all these stories that we’re creating...all these limitations we put on each other._ (Fifth circle)

_Our masks._

Not surprisingly, the group research revealed much the same as my personal research; our sense of identity is often made up with stories from our past.

_We always have those bad memories but it’s hard to remember the good things sometimes. It’s just the bad things you don’t want to let-go because you think that they define you and maybe changed you._ (Alicia, third circle)

_I really believe that I can all by myself do all the stuff I do, I spent more than 16 years alone travelling, working with survivors of the world in Latin America and I can keep it all in my back, in my heart....But I realised that sometimes it can be very interesting to ask the community to help so that is a big change I think that I’m beginning to do._ (Marie-Hélène, third circle)

_For the longest time...I’ve been collecting stories and I’ve been writing them out and I’ve been hoping that one day all of these adventures will amount to an actual story that I will write....I have the weight of all of these journals and I’m just kind of going like, I don’t know if I want this in my new home._ (Paula, fourth circle)
At the beginning of my teaching career, I spent two years working in Rwanda and in the past [the memories have] really spun me into a state of paralysis and I’ve stayed there for a long time, you know, I guess my journey...it really brings me to...a pretty, a pretty dark place. (Paula, fourth circle)

When I was in grade 8, a kid tried to kill me. And he had brought a bunch of, what I considered my friends, because we were in quite a small town, was our family, really. But they had all sort of conspired to trap me in this place and tried to kill me...And it made me realise that maybe that’s where I have some...some blocks about belonging and feeling like I belong to anything because I just didn’t trust anything and I thought it’s easier to just not, not to open yourself up, not to say I trust you or give you my secrets or even try to befriend you because that’s just, well, it’s just not going to turn out well, that’s all. (Paulette, fourth circle)

I can’t even count the amount of times since Mat and I have been together that we’ve been constantly moving and in my family, like we’re affectionately called like the gypsy family because we’re always moving, we’re always on the go, we’re sometimes in the campground because we have no other choice but you know, it’s all kind of part of this adventure that Mat and I have started and I think I’ve been feeling quite neutral about this house because I am finally feeling comfortable with that fluidity in my life and there’s been some fear about having those four walls blocking that fluidity and that movement and that change and that flux that I’m just feeling like I’m learning to ride and embrace.... (Paula, fourth circle)

Sometimes, our sense of who we think we are is in conflict with what we are called to do in the present moment. It seems that with our resistance to what is, can come dis-ease and suffering.
...I’m working all the time, so that makes sense, that right side, that argh-warrior, like keep going, keep going. I’m kind of in a little phase the last couple of days where I’m like, “I don’t wanna work” (in a squeaky voice followed by laughter). I’m tired (still laughing). My back hurts. (Grace, second circle)

Similar to the findings from the personal research, the group shared stories about when we projected our identities or masks onto others. The practice of mindful reflection appears to have permitted us to recognize these traps.

I had some moments of extreme, I would say, frustration and it had to do with my daughter regressing and whenever she regresses with toileting issues it always pushes my buttons to no end. It’s the big one that can just set me through the roof. So I started to look at the idea of how attached I am to beliefs about my happiness connected to her success or failure in particularly this area of toileting. So when she’s mastering the toilet and sleeping through the night with a dry bed, I’m like yes! And as soon as she regresses and wets the bed, I’m like, argh! And that kind of yo-yoing bothers me. I don’t want to be in that situation any more. I want to just be able to be stable with whatever she does. (Grace, third circle)

It made me think, along with masks that I’ve kept on other people in my life. Even though something happened years ago, I imagine them to be wearing the very same mask that I saw them wear more than a decade ago in one case, and my father in another case. And thinking about how much I’ve changed throughout my journey and wondering how many people still see me wearing a mask that I wore when I interacted with them [long ago]. (Kim, third circle)

I am her and she is me. Respect each others’ space and voice. (Kim, fourth circle)

I had the same situation with a friend and actually I thought that she was my enemy before that...And that second I realised that maybe that wasn’t true, maybe there was a
friendship, just the whole time, because I had this image in my head that she was my enemy, I didn’t realise that actually we had become friends. (Alicia, fifth circle)

I think I thought we were going to grow something together. Instead he's gone off and done something alone....Belief change: I can allow people to come into my life, feel great magic with them, create beautiful things and then let them go, knowing that forever they will be part of me and my life and that it is okay that the intensity has changed. The love that originally created the spark is always there. Expectations only keep people prisoners. I hated being a prisoner. I don’t want to be a jailer. (Grace, eighth circle)

The most nefarious of our masks often get placed on those with whom we have limited interaction or communication.

The only thing that scares me is people. And I think I’ve been followed twice. And one was a car and he stopped and I just hid in the bush more and he backed up his car and he came back and then he got out of the car. And it was just weird. An odd, I don’t know what it was but I was scared. (Paulette, fourth circle)

I had no choice and I didn’t really like my situation and I fashioned a weapon....I only had a hunting knife, a little knife with a broken tip but just to be safe I duct taped it to the end of a long stick and each night when I hit the trailhead, I had a flashlight hidden and the stick with...I knew the cougar was following me and I had no choice. (Patrick, fourth circle)

And the President, or one of the Major Generals responsible for the genocide, I just looked in his eyes and that’s when I thought, that’s just pure evil. They were weird. It was like an alien set of eyes. Green and opaque. And vacant. And that, I’ve never tasted anything like that in my life. (Patrick, fourth circle)
The masks we place on others are frequently a projection of the disowned, and sometimes magnified, parts of ourselves. At the introduction evening for the group research, we discussed the concept of the sacred mirror and that it would likely reflect both brilliance and darkness to each of us from within and outside of the circle during the research period. As a result of discussing these concepts, it seems the group members felt safe to explore the shadow parts of ourselves in a safe environment. We were able to explore those characteristics we had disowned for not suiting the type of person we identify with most.

*Connecting with that part of myself too that sometimes I’m not very nice and sometimes I’m mean and that’s when I feel I don’t belong.* (Kim, third circle)

*I’m aware of, there’s this inner, well, my control freak but also wanting to project an image of being free and easy and flexible and trying to figure out where the balance is. When do we let things just go? When do we pull things back in?* (Kim, third circle)

*I don’t want to be somebody else’s prey....I’ve been locked into that feeling of just feeling like I’m prey. I’m victim. And I think I just need to sit with that a bit. I don’t want to be prey. I think two years of living in Rwanda I just experienced these polarities and flux and I kind of almost came to this conclusion that like I recognize those polarities within myself, the, you know, the evil, the light, the darkness...we’re talking about shadows and really recognizing that I tread on a little tightrope and it’s just, if you’re not mindful it’s so easy to fall into the evil and I mean I certainly have stories that I don’t feel proud of, you know, just interactions with Rwandan children when I was at my edge. And I wouldn’t say that I was that light.* (Paula, fourth circle)

*I get freaked out when I talk to clients and it may as well be me speaking, talking about my own fears and inadequacies and addictions. You know it’s just there’s so much of me in everybody else and I think if it’s true for me it’s probably true for everybody. You know, if we*
see a little bit of ourselves in somebody else, we’re probably not seeing enough because there’s a lot of ourselves in everybody. (Patrick, fifth circle)

In the circle, we shared stories about falling into the identity traps that others had set for us, or that we imagined they had. Our friends, family, and society also place masks on us. Being mindful of these expectations allows us to choose whether we wear them or not.

When Maya was quite young, she was about two years old, she was, we were at Lake Edith and we were having supper at someone’s cabin and we were on the deck and she was just playing in the front and a coyote came out of nowhere and just kind of bee-lined it for her and she belted out her I AM! She screamed and she then, the coyote then kind of just glanced aside and kind of looked at us sheepishly and said, ‘Ooops. My mistake. Sorry to interrupt your dinner party. Off I go!’ kind of thing but I know that that really freaked me out because I thought in some way, and this was when I was getting so much pressure from my, my extended family because my child wasn’t baptised and that was somehow that her soul was, you know, in trouble. And then I was really scared of coyote. (Paula, third circle)

I want to be in the present, to live now. I’m not [just] the granddaughter of my grandfather or the niece of my aunt, or the daughter of my father. I want to believe that I can let it go, that I can be different, that I have a choice. That I can decide where I belong even if it means that I don’t belong. (Alicia, fifth circle)

A wolf, it's bad, it's angry, he blow the house because he want to eat the little pigs but maybe he blow the house because he just want to enter in the house and share games with the little pigs, take tea with them and he don't know how to enter a relation with the little pigs and the version of the story we have is the little pig's, they give us the story. (Marie-Hélène, eighth circle)
I belong.

With a practice in mindfulness, I’ve come to recognize that much of my suffering occurs when I believe that either I or the triggers of pain—both mine and others’—do not belong. However, when I acknowledge and allow for the discomfort, and accept that both I and the triggers of pain may belong in the present moment, I find I’m able to move beyond my comfort zones, into a space of possibility for a new response. This is not to suggest that I become apathetic about preventing the occurrence of future or existing pain, but if it occurs, I can release my perceptions of what should be and allow for what is. It was through fostering a belief in my own belonging that I discovered the trigger(s) for my discomfort also belong(s).

Wherever I am, I belong. We belong. I believe this.

It's rippling beyond the Circle.

I belong. She belongs. He belongs. It belongs. (Fifth circle)

During the research, I realised that perhaps, as an environmental educator and communicator, it may serve me to allow space for the discomfort that arises when I observe human activity that harms our ecosystems and its inhabitants. Rather than continue to avoid, escape from, or attempt to fix the pain we experience in death and endings, perhaps by stepping into the discomfort, we might discover new solutions for change. Stepping into the distress is not to aggressively confront or fight it. Instead, it is to become present with it, preferably without judgement. When we learn to settle into the present moment, even when there is discomfort, our fixed and reactive habits relax and we are able to respond in creative and innovative ways.

That’s part of my identity, or what I think is my identity, is making things happen, making things change....I wonder if that gets in...my way. (Fifth circle)
Sometimes I don’t want to belong. This arises for me especially when I hear stories about people who defile the land and/or those who inhabit it. I continue to struggle with these feelings and deeply wonder if it is possible that some things/people don’t belong. I find myself believing I don’t belong in certain situations, especially those of authoritarianism.

\textit{I just want to quit.}

\textit{Free shots of Johnny Walker.}

\textit{It’s easier.} (December 2012)

I am reminded of the words from an Elder, Sequoyah Trueblood. He professed, “Whenever you scream out, ‘I don’t need this!’ gently remind yourself that this is exactly what you need” (personal communication, November 28, 2009). All is Divine, and it all belongs.

\textbf{We belong.}

Similar to what I found during my personal research, when a feeling of discomfort or difference arose, there seemed to be a belief that somebody or something did not belong.

\textit{I’ve been thinking a lot about the wolves. Coming home after being in the city and seeing that every trailhead, I was somehow entering or that there was a sign, warning! Wolf! And I was really aware of that and I was really aware of who was somehow framing that experience that there’s a line there and there’s that sign there and who belongs. Do I belong? Do the wolves belong? Do we both belong?} (Paula, third circle)

\textit{I feel some stuff inside because I did not understand about the language, I did not understand all because I did not remember what mean ‘belong’ so I lost a lot. And I can judge myself and say, “Oh my god, I can’t be part of a group because I don’t have the language but it’s part of the (she laughs)...I can just share my sensation now that the language is something a}
bit hard for me in English so but I need to find a better strategy to be part of the group. (Marie-Hélène, third circle)

There kind of came a point where I wasn’t feeling connected or I didn’t feel like I belonged to that clan and haven’t really kept in touch with a lot of people and it really was quite nice to just kind of enter that whole crowd with a different mindset and I definitely experienced belonging and I haven’t in that context for quite some time. (Paula, fourth circle)

It seems that for various reasons, many of us sense a lack of belonging in certain places, or with particular people and life situations. A belief in belonging can be practiced, though this does not guarantee an experience of belonging. Perhaps once the belief is embodied, even the sensation of not belonging will belong.

I suppose it helps to keep reassuring ourselves, to keep telling ourselves we belong. And the emphasis on “I belong” makes me feel, or implies that there’s a struggle to belong. (Patrick, third circle)

What came to my mind was that song from Simply Red ‘Home’... so there’s one sentence that says ‘home is where I yearn to belong’ but what I understood for the first time was ‘where I’ll learn to belong’ saying it’s a process of learning. (Alicia, third circle)

What if rather than being not important at all, I am the most important thing after all? ...Hear this: I am ready; I, am ready; I am, Ready. Awake my soul. Once I’m on level ground "You are not very nice." I belong. I be long. Those who will, stay. We share this pit. It boils over some times. (Paulette, third meeting)

We as an individual and as a whole, and we belong. We’re talking about belonging to something bigger. Jasper is just a great place to see that, that we belong into nature, that
everything has its place and its order and that it’s good and that we should preserve that.

(Alicia, third circle)

We are already unbroken at some level....None of that, what kept me broken, is real if it’s not real, if it’s not something that I nurture or feed anymore. That’s it, it’s done...you can hold yourself up, and you’re perfect as you are. And then you’re part of this other huge perfection and it’s lovely. (Paulette, third circle)

Just witnessing my girls experience the world and just really trying to mindful of, of that little piece that, that they are, that they are part of all of this and how I as an adult can teach them that they are separate from it. (Paula, third circle)

We do come from that source...we are part of everything...so we really do belong here and the sooner we remember that, I think it’s probably going to be better for the planet too. (Paulette, seventh circle)

Perhaps I am different but not separate.

Though a heart and liver are two organs in a body, the body needs both; one cannot function without the other because while they are different, they are not separate. I believe this is also true for humans, and other-than-humans. We may serve diverse functions from each other but we are not separate.

A woodpecker called me outside at twilight.

Pink pillows billow above.

Cloud angels.

The shadow of a hawk.

I felt invisible. A part of the land. (December 2011)

Balance between persistence and annoyance?
Obedience & Freedom?

Cleansing what does not make me feel alive.

Whittle it down! Exclusion?

Polarities uniting. (Fifth circle)

Perhaps we are different but not separate.

Though many polar opposites became apparent throughout the group research, there was also recognition of something that encompasses the dualities. While the opposites are different, they are not separate. It is a paradox. Once we can learn to relax into the present moment, and to dance in, between, and around these differentiated, yet encompassed spaces, our experience of equanimity can be enhanced.

It’s like breastfeeding a baby. You have to do both sides because otherwise you’re going to have this enormous breast on one side and this little tiny thing [on the other side]. So I have to learn to switch, whether it’s physical because I know that I am bigger on one side, but have I always been doing everything with my right side and my left side is just kinda like having coffee? (Paulette, second circle)

It feels more like one being nested inside the other. And maybe one can’t be nested inside unless they’re two different things....Maybe...we can still have dual but not separate. It feels more like it’s nested inside, like our cell is nested inside our liver, our liver is nested inside our body, our body is nested inside this community, our community is nested inside this world. (Kim, third circle)

There’s a [Holon] theory that we are at once, or simultaneously, a whole within ourselves and a part of a greater whole at the same time. In order to be a positive element in the
greater whole, one must be healthy. So it seems that if you’re not healthy and a part of this
greater whole, that erosion tends to erase you. (Patrick, third circle)

**Liberating ourselves from a fixed identity.**

Those who do not have power over the stories that dominate their lives, power to
retell them, rethink them, deconstruct them, joke about them, and change them as
times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts.

(Rushdie, 1991)

Finally, we shared ideas about how to liberate ourselves from old stories of identity,
especially those that don’t make sense in our lives anymore. This process of releasing stale
assumptions and beliefs, especially about sensation and identity, is met with various reactions
from the systems in which we live.

*I have been thinking about burning [my journals] and again, I’m sharing these thoughts
with...my mom...[and] with friends and people at home at my parent’s house and this whole thing
about No! Don’t do that....Your kids! Your legacy!...You want your kids to know you and that
just really brought up a lot for me....For the longest time I’ve been carrying [the journals] along
because I’ve felt that they’re an extension of me and that there’s the story of me right there in the
box and kind of realizing that the story is all here (points to self). (Paula, fourth circle)*

The situations are reversing. They put sticks in my wheels, tried to dampen my projects.
Now they help me, encourage me and congratulate me. They attacked me ironically and now
they approach me kindly, they put their head on my shoulder to shed a tear in confidence. They
bugged me, harassed me in need of love. Now they leave me space to breathe, to move in my
own distinct rhythm by love and gratitude. And where does this change come from? All I did
was send them appreciation with some of my exhalations, I only breathed encouraging the point
of movement of energy from my breast, I was careful not to take anything personally, I was centred and I waited patiently. (Marie-Hélène, fifth circle)

I burnt about twelve years worth of journals and I burnt a vision board too...the ability to be compatible with fire turns out to be a landscape of innovation and passion. A lifelong shift. (Paula, fifth circle)

Time and space

Time and space are concepts that many of us perceive to be increasingly scarce, yet both appear to be necessary for relationship and communication. A practice of mindfulness seems to expand our experience of time and space.

Time.

Metaphors of time infiltrate our language. Examples from the transcriptions include: sometimes, all the time, a hard time, spend time, make time, moment in time, this time, the whole time, the amount of times, at this point in time, and the longest time.

Deadlines loom and we frequently feel there is not enough time.

I haven’t carved time.... (Paula, fifth circle)

I did not have time to go at home....I don’t have time because I am in emergency... She speaks on the run and there’s not even time. (Marie-Hélène, sixth circle)

I need as much time by myself as possible because it’s exhausting. (Patrick, sixth circle)

...Talking about time, what you say, deadline, or something like that, today I was thinking oh, thinking about my loves, the kids at the preschool, thinking, oh, I just have two more months with them but two more months of present time. (Marie-Hélène, eighth circle)

...When I have the time to sit down.... (Alicia, eighth circle)
In my findings for both the personal and group research, there were many stories about the past and a few about the future. Speaking and dwelling in the present, however, appears to be a challenge but can increase with practice.

**Space.**

The theme of space, both inner and outer, also intertwines with other themes.

*I just want to be able to make room for those questions and I feel quite freed by the nothingness at the beginning of the day, that I don’t have to have all the answers and I think I know that, or I think I know that, but it’s just, you know, it’s registering here and I just see the kids responding quite differently.* (Paula, fifth circle)

*I’m really feeling at home in my body, in my space.* (Paula, sixth circle)

During the research, the co-participants and I became more aware of the boundaries we perceive between the inner and outer spaces of the individual, and the community. For example, we asked questions such as: where does human territory end and that of wildlife begin? Where does private ownership end and the commons (Hardin, 1968) begin? Where do my responsibilities end and someone else’s begin? Where are the boundaries, or are there any?

*They’re going to close off those trails and it made me understand how the wolves would feel, like what is this line and how come now it’s so squishy and...such a feeling of anxiety....We share this space and yet why do we...is that line really there? Is the territory getting smaller? Are there too many people to share with the wolves?* (Paulette, third circle)

**Let Go, Let it Flow**

The movement of water emerged from the research findings as an overall metaphor for the theme of letting go. Throughout the research, the concepts of flow and resistance arose in a similar manner to ideas about being open or closed to the experiences we encounter. When we
allow ourselves to be open to the present moment, a sense of joy often follows. Regardless of feelings of pleasure or discomfort, this joy is a result of trust in the natural ebbs and flows of life; all events and sensations naturally come and go. When we are closed, when we create metaphorical dams as an attempt to capture the flow of pleasure or to block pain from entering, we suffer.

**I allow life to flow.**

While I want to permit for the inevitable flow of life, I also want to be grounded rather than be washed away by my experiences and the physical and emotional sensations they trigger. I am able to watch my thoughts and memories about my relationships, communication, beliefs, sensations, and identities flow down the river, while I observe them from the shore. During the first few months of the personal study, I repetitively jumped in the river, and found myself circling around and around – as though in a river eddy – in memories that triggered sensations of guilt, anger, and anxiety (see Figure 4.5). As I continue to practice my release of the past and expectations for the future, I’ve become better able to observe the flow of my experiences rather than be sucked in and drowned by them.

*As an ocean of memories descends upon me,*

* I anticipate another wave will soon again flood me with guilt...  

* Jumping into rivers of shame and guilt,*

* I replay what I could have said. (November 2011)*

*I jump into the river of anger...*

* I catch my thoughts before I drown  

* In fears of inadequacy...*  

*I watch them float away.*
The passing nature of discomfort. (January 2012)

I came to notice how I use water metaphors to describe emotional sensations, such as overwhelm, but also wonder. I recall several incidents during the research and after when I’ve used my mindful practice to explore the anxiety that brews within me. Simply by observing the sensations, the inner storm calms.


*Waves, tsunamis rushing this way and that...*

*The storm resides to rolling waves.* (First circle)
While walking in the woods, I’ve also felt washed over by wonderment and awe for the life cycles one can witness so distinctly in environments uncontrolled by humans. Feeling blessed, an additional metaphor I associate with water, is another sensation that I experience frequently.

During the research, I became aware of how water serves as a metaphor for the experiences that shape our identities. As my life’s experiences have shaped my identity, water has shaped the identity of the land. While I was in Utah and Arizona before and during the beginning of my personal study, I was struck by how the area, once flowing with water, is now nearly void of it. The terrain has changed over time and while the story of a previous aquatic identity remains, the space is now a dessert. Unlike me, the land doesn’t dwell in, grasp at, or resist its identity-forming stories. It lets them flow.

The water has long been gone

But has left its mark,

And carved out a story in the land. (November 2011)

We allow life to flow.

Through the group study, it became apparent that water serves us as a powerful metaphor for life. I suppose this is not surprising considering the water content of our bodies.

It can be used to describe inner turmoil.

I just described it as a storm because so much was happening and whenever I thought it would calm down there would be new waves. (Alicia, eighth circle)

Water permits us to explore the concept that things can be distinct from each other but not separate.

The individual wave [is] a part of the larger ocean...without the ocean, we’ll never have the wave and without the wave, we’ll never have the ocean. (Kim, third circle)
Water represents a source of protection.

_I found this creek and it was my sanctuary, it became my sanctuary...I would just sit there and just fill up... I don’t know what was in that water but that protection that I felt coming from that water just still runs._ (Paula, fourth circle)

Water can also symbolically cleanse the stories of identity that we carry forward from the past, our own masks or those we place on others.

_I took pottery lessons from a genocide prisoner...one day we were working out in the sun....It was not uncommon for random rain showers to just come upon us....The next thing I knew, I was being...ushered into this building....I was surrounded by...about fifteen genocide prisoners in their pink pyjama-like uniforms and the care and sensitivity and attention that all of these men had for me and the awareness of me being in that space with them was probably one of the...times in Rwanda where I felt the most peaceful and I mean it was just kind of focusing on the silence ‘cuz we were all silent and we were all watching the rain kind of pound down on the earth._ (Paula, fourth circle)

Water reminds us of the onward moving energy of life. The forward, flowing movement of water is used to express the joy and ease that is possible when we release a need to have control of events, conditions, and people in our lives, all of which are co-created more than we can ever know. There are ample opportunities to practice letting go, and allowing for the flow.

_Being inside a river, I always feel like I’m going forward...You have to go forward, that’s the whole momentum of the whole world. You can’t stop the Universe from shifting forward._ (Paulette, fifth circle)

_They invent games and when I flow with that we have so much fun._ (Marie-Hélène, sixth circle)
It’s funny how you think that maybe you have let-it-go and then something brings it up again and you go, “Shit! That’s still in there?! Argh!” (Paulette, third circle)

Letting go, ya, it’s a hard thing to do and I don’t know if I’ve ever successfully let something go...I think we let go but there’s no guarantee it’s not going to surface again and that doesn’t mean that we haven’t let it go but we’ve stopped dwelling on it for the time being. (Patrick, third circle)

Though water is often associated with movement, it also holds possibility for the ebb; for stillness and calm.

*Sometimes you want to pull away ‘cuz it’s too much...and you pull back and you come back in and so more like equanimity.* (Paulette, seventh circle)

*You were lying by the ocean and...the waves were lapping over you very gently and then the sound I heard was...when the rocks are...going back into the ocean...a very repetitive soft and gentle lapping of the waves just moving over you and through you.* (Paula, eighth circle)

**Coyote**

I’d be remiss if I left out mention of coyote in a discussion of the themes I composed from the data. Coyote appeared regularly in our stories during the personal and group research (see Figure 4.6). Coyote is a mythological trickster, known to “open gateways of awareness and insight” (Anderson, 2004, p. 326). Because of this, I often wondered if I was about to be fooled by my assumptions. As Bob suggested during the edits of this thesis, perhaps coyote was not a theme, but I was tricked into believing he was so he could have an important role. Coyote reminds us to be present and helps us to lift the veils of our programmed assumptions and beliefs (campbellfoundation, 2010).
Throughout the personal and group research, I heard several stories outside of the circle about people wanting to kill coyote for the fear he arouses in us. I suppose experiencing the world more clearly is a frightful concept, for we may not always like what we see. Then again, we may also discover how our inner joy comes alive when we are able to choose the filters through which we experience the world.

_Shine light on the shadow_

_The Dark Teacher. Coyote?_

_Sunshine burns away the hold on anger._

_Power is my greatest asset and my greatest weakness._

_We breathe in and out the same air. (Kim, second circle)_

_Oh Coyote!_

_Fear of Coyote._

_Coyote is dangerous._

_Every night the coyotes would circle my camp and for a month I spent my time pissing a perimeter, you know, to see if the coyotes would respond. (Patrick, fourth circle)_

_Within 5 minutes of walking on the trail, I was warned about the coyotes. And I was like, wow, there’s lots of fear around here. And it was a Parks staff that had warned me about_
coyotes and then when we got back to the car, another Parks staff member was there with a gun, hunting coyote. (Kim, fourth circle)

Figure 4.6. Coyote: The Trickster

Figure 4.6. Coyote was present throughout the research process, both in Arizona and in Jasper. This photo was taken in Suncity, Arizona, in December 2011, just after Coyote’s lunch flew away. As I took this photo, I began to feel nervous because Coyote didn’t seem to notice me and just kept coming closer, and closer along the wall. As soon as my inner sensations shifted from a sense of belonging to feelings of discomfort, Coyote noticed me and ran away.

Last week, it’s funny, the card I pick was coyote. And this week, 3 time, I shuffle the card and all the time coyote appear, all the time….Coyote winks at me, it was him last week who made me choose the insecurity card. Oh, how I love this one. (Marie-Hélène, sixth circle)

...Seeing things become apparent that maybe weren’t before. And coyote again. Coyote shows up at every meeting. Thank goodness for Coyote. (Kim, sixth circle)

And I just look at the cards and the coyote is there laughing at me and after I saw that I don’t know but something. So coyote was there, every week... tonight I receive a beautiful gift
from my community here. Paulette gave me that (shows the group a framed photo of coyote).

It’s my clown with the big, not red nose, but big nose. And when you see the face, you see the heart. The first time I saw it, the heart. And it’s just beautiful to receive the gift. (Marie-Hélène, seventh circle)

Coyote knocks on the door on route to Snape's Hill. "Welcome to the neighborhood, babe. Havin' fun yet?" (Paula, eighth circle)

The picture of coyote is just in front of elevator, waiting, so often I'm like that...just waiting and maybe...I don't need to go in the elevator in the past, in the future or up and down....Just this time to just be in the present and breathe...the sense of the community and sharing... I love it. All this nature and knocking tock-tock-tock, at the door to teach us something or ding! The elevator. Ding! Open your door and open a new opportunities. (Marie-Hélène, eighth circle)

Chapter Summary

I compiled several themes from the personal and group research. With a practice of mindfulness, a questioning of our assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of our beliefs of belonging, the co-participants and I experienced increased awareness of: (a) relationships; (b) communication; (c) assumptions and beliefs about sensation and identity; (d) time and space; (e) flow; and (f) coyote.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Reflection

In this final chapter, I offer: (a) a summary of the study and its connections with the literature; (b) a personal reflection of the research process infused with thoughts I collected from the other co-participants during our closing interviews; (c) a discussion of the implications and potential applications of the findings, and how they are relevant to environmental education and communication; and (d) my thoughts about the importance of future research that helps to illuminate the inner landscape and how it influences our work in the world.

Overall Summary of the Research and Connections to the Literature

Six co-participants and I explored how a practice of mindfulness, an investigation of our current assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of our beliefs of belonging influence our relationships. It was an inquiry into how interiority affects the world outside of us. I began with a four month personal study in which I explored my own experiences with the research questions. Following this, six co-participants and I explored collective experiences of the same questions for the next two months.

Through an immersion in the transcriptions of the stories that were shared during the group research, I cognitively composed several themes with the assistance and verification of the co-participants. These conceptual themes were supported by my own experience, as well as by the information recorded in the co-participants’ Experience Journals. The themes include: (a) all beings are interconnected in communities of relationship; (b) communication occurs amongst those in these relationships; (c) our experiences of belonging are influenced by our assumptions and beliefs about sensation and identity; (d) our relationships and communication are often framed by our assumptions about time and space; (e) we are capable of letting old
stories and beliefs go in exchange for ones that are relevant in the present; and (f) the trickster, Coyote, assists us to lift the veils that obstruct our perception.

**How the research influenced relationships.**

**Relationships and communication.**

The findings gathered from this research appear to demonstrate that through a practice in mindfulness, we become increasingly aware of the relationships and the communication that interconnect us with others, human and other-than-human. The literature supports that living beings are “wired to be connected and interdependent” (Lucas, 2012, p. 42). As Capra (1996) states:

All members of an ecological community are interconnected in a vast and intricate network of relationships, the web of life....The success of the whole community depends on the success of its individual members, while the success of each member depends on the success of the community as a whole. (p. 298)

Through the literature review, I learned of several cultural misunderstandings, including how we’ve interpreted Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. “Survival of the fittest” does not necessarily imply we are meant to be in constant competition with each other, but rather that our success as one participant in the planetary eco-system, may actually depend on cooperation, interaction, and networks with human *and* other-than-human members of our community (Lipton & Bhearman, 2009; Margulis & Sagan, 1986). In fact, the stress of being in constant competition for resources or status not only sets us up for fear and anger, but also claims most of our attention so that our awareness becomes limited to perceived threats (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). The concept that we must compete in order to survive seems to leave us void of
happiness and peace. This may then have a negative impact on our biological and cultural survival.

I believe that each sentient being within a community has Divine purpose; each one of us contributes to the whole, even if that contribution is perceived negatively. For example, it is possible that a member’s function may be to help others practice forgiveness by repetitively behaving in a harmful manner. It seems the human experience involves much time wondering about, doubting, and questioning not only our own individual and collective roles as a species, but also the roles of others. Imagine a world where we trusted in our own and each others’ belonging and purpose, and we all took accountability for what we co-create.

So that members within a living system can learn about and share information that assists us to fulfill our duty to the whole, we have communication. We witness amongst the other-than-human species that it is possible to co-adapt and to communicate across species. Yet as humans, especially as members of English-speaking Western culture, we have a tendency to ignore or expect assimilation by those whose communication is different from our own. Perhaps, within the human community, we have a duty not only to learn the language of the inner voice, but also the different languages of those who surround us, human and other-than-human. Perhaps with our capacity to reflect, be self-aware, and learn intentionally, humans have a responsibility to communicate in multiple ways.

Chief Dan George (as cited in Andrews, 1993) recommends:

If you talk to the animals they will talk with you and you will know each other. If you do not talk to them, you will not know them. And what you do not know, you will fear. What one fears, one destroys. (p. xi)
We learn much about the world by watching and listening, rather than by continuously making noise, a behaviour our culture is well versed in. While we’re accomplished at watching and listening to inanimate objects, such as the television or our smart phones, for extended periods of time, we are not always skilled at listening attentively to other sentient beings. During the circle, Paulette shared some of her grandmother’s relevant wisdom.

*My grandmother, she used to always say, “You have one mouth and two ears. Do the math.* (Paulette, sixth circle)

As was experienced in my personal research and in the circle, exercising the capacity to listen feels like an important step toward a stronger awareness of our relationships with self and others, human and other-than-human. The practice of mindfulness appears to assist us with the ability to listen attentively.

Narayanan (2007) suggests that in order to hear the messages of the other-than-humans, we need to slow down to their pace, to their “metronome”. We need to “dwell in spaces” (Payne & Wattchow, 2009, p. 2) long enough to understand the local language of an ecological community. As with any form of communication, the best way to receive information is to be open and relaxed (King, 2009). When we are speaking, tense, or focussed elsewhere, it becomes a challenge to perceive the messages that are being shared with us. The practice of mindfulness helps us to enter into a relaxed state, where we have greater capacity to hear the less apparent voices from within and outside of ourselves (Kabat-Zinn, 2002, 2005).

*Assumptions and beliefs.*

While the first question of the research asked how the practice of mindfulness influences our relationships, the second and third questions sought to explore how an investigation of our assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of our beliefs of belonging, affect our relationships.
The research and literature suggest that “mindful meditation enables its practitioners to become aware of unconscious processes” (McTaggart, 2008, p. 348), such as our assumptions and beliefs about belonging, sensation, and identity.

**Belonging.**

Our beliefs about belonging are deeply rooted in our beliefs about survival. The practice of mindfulness, in addition to the cultivation of a belief in belonging, seems to foster awareness that despite our differences and discomforts with other living beings, we are not separate from them; we belong. The practice of mindfulness permits us to be less reactive so that we can consciously choose socially appropriate responses. Should our mindful responses be rejected by the community, this may indicate an unmindful society. I believe this has been the case for the Abolitionists, civil rights activists in the 1960s, climate change scientists, and Ghandi.

Living systems are “like waves on the ocean [that] rise up for a moment, and then fall back into the ocean itself, and lose their identity...returning to their undifferentiated water nature” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 280). We all live and die. We all breathe and share the same air, and the molecules outside of us soon become a part of our biological structures. “This unseen presence...flows not just within us but between all things, granting us life and speech even as it moves the swaying grasses and the gathering clouds” (Abram, 1996, p. 249). Though living entities may be physically distinct, as with individual waves, we are not separate.

**Sensation.**

According to this research and the literature, the practice of mindfulness can heighten an awareness of emotional and physical sensations, including those of pain and discomfort. Emotional discomfort that has been ignored has been known to manifest as physical pain (Maté, 2003). Emotional pain is frequently connected with fixed assumptions and beliefs about identity.
and expectations for the world and its beings. While the practice of mindfulness can increase our awareness of pain, it also facilitates our ability to remain present with discomfort, and to release our grasp on the urge to fix that which does not meet our expectations. When we are able to relax into our pain, the tension of resistance can ease, further reducing the discomfort we experience.

Many of us hold assumptions about which sensations belong in our experience. Such assumptions, in addition to our lack of awareness about how our brain has evolved for survival, can affect how we respond to relationships and communication. The prevalence of our cultural addictions to technology, sex, food, drugs, alcohol, and shopping may be a result of our tendency to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Rather than listen to the communication that an uncomfortable experience may offer us, or express gratitude because our mind/brain is functioning to warn us of potential danger as it has evolved to do (Hanson & Mendius, 2009), we have a tendency to flee, fight, or freeze in the presence of pain or discomfort. The irony is that while such habitual reactions may offer us temporary relief from pain, they also tend to exacerbate our discomfort in the long term. It is often at great costs to our relationships and the health of our bodies and ecosystems that we remain mostly unaware of the inner landscape, including our reactions to the sensations and triggers we associate with pain and pleasure.

*Identity.*

Identity, a term rooted in a Latin word meaning “sameness,” gives us an expectation of consistency. In the case of a person or situation, identity involves embodying certain characteristics but not others. Whether it involves our self, others, or the world, the concept of identity can trigger a reaction to change or fix that which we assume does not belong. To fix something, is to make it stable or definite; to solve it; to return it to its former state; or, to match
it to an ideal of how we think it should be. While this urge to fix and keep life stable may help us to make sense of the world, it becomes pathological when it removes the dynamic and fluid life-force inherent to a living system.

Humans and other organisms have an instinctual drive to draw boundaries between themselves and the world, and to stabilize an ever-changing environment. The brain evolved so that an organism could sense its distinct individuality and whereabouts in relation to others and circumstances that might threaten its survival. At the same time, “to live, an organism must metabolize: it must exchange matter and energy with its environment” (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 27). In this way, each organism is made of its environment and cannot be separate from it, though it may be harmed by it. Additionally, though an individual organism needs to maintain homeostasis within itself, it is also required to be receptive to an ever-changing external environment. While these survival strategies have led to the continuation of our species and others, they can also cause tremendous confusion and discomfort, especially for the self-reflective human brain. The human brain has evolved to detect, but not necessarily understand, the inherent paradoxes involved in these survival mechanisms related to identity. As a result, we suffer (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

Time and space.

The practice of mindfulness facilitates an awareness of how perceptions of time and space can expand. De Quincey (2002) states there is “no absolute time and space characteristic” (p. 24) as inferred by Newtonian science. We have categorized time and space, and placed dividers between minutes and hours, past and future, inner and outer, mine and yours. While these concepts may help us to maintain our sanity, the hypothetical threat of their scarcity also tends to cause great angst. As a result, messages about the scarcity of time and space are often
used as a method of control over human behaviour, albeit perhaps not intentionally. For example, there are deadlines to meet and spaces to protect. Time and space are in short supply. With the practice of mindfulness, time and space seem to become rich with wonder and possibility rather than fraught with limitation.

*Flow.*

I currently understand that an individual mind is a part of a collective mind. With a closed mind, we may be less aware of that which occurs both outside and within ourselves. When our mind is closed, we might feel we’ve lost our mind, or have become mindless. When our mind is open, we can better sense the omnipresent energy that flows through us and connects us with everything that ever was, and ever will be.

Almost always, my mind seems to be relatively closed with pin-holes that allow me to experience an occasional sense of connection with something all-encompassing. While these pin-holes may be expanding ever so slightly, sometimes when my mind opens up more than usual, I become overwhelmed with discomfort. When this occurs, I may react in a way that shuts my mind down in defence. This reaction is often triggered by fear, a sensation that evolutionarily triggers a narrowing of our attention to deal with a perceived threat (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). A practice of mindfulness can help us to linger in the discomfort, and to maintain an open mind.

*In a nutshell.*

In summary, the practice of mindfulness helps us to remain present as we: (a) become aware of our responses to the world; (b) investigate our assumptions and beliefs connected with these responses; (c) intentionally cultivate new beliefs, such as a belief in belonging; and (d) choose new responses.
The findings of this research and the literature demonstrate the capacity inherent in a practice of mindfulness to positively influence our relationships. A practice of mindfulness appears to be enhanced by a simultaneous, intentional examination of current assumptions and beliefs, and a cultivation of beliefs of belonging.

As humans, we have the ability to explore and cultivate new beliefs about belonging, sensation, and identity, and to release old ones that no longer serve us. Mindful behaviour is unlike many of the typical reaction patterns that have been passed down through the generations from ancestors who evolved to survive in different biological and social environments. It therefore seems that frequent practice of and training for mindfulness may be required to alter the habitual information pathways of our brain (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). This research and other studies demonstrate that positive results are possible in as little as eight weeks of mindfulness training (McGonigal, 2012).

**Reflections and Research in Action**

Mind shaping is world changing. When you change the story, you change the map. When you change the map, you change the landscape. When you change the landscape, you change your experiences and your choices. When you change your experiences and your choices, you can change your mind. And when you change your mind, you can change the world. (Marshall, 2011)

In my research proposal, I acknowledged “a list of preliminary interpretive lenses” (Anderson, 2004, p. 313), which included my perspective that as a creative conscious being, I have the ability to influence my inner and outer environments with my thoughts. Though my other beliefs – (a) my internal and external worlds are intimately interconnected; (b) humans can intentionally retrain their neurological pathways; and (c) relationships and communication
transcend time, space, and species – have been reinforced through this research, I continue to deeply examine my understanding of how thoughts might influence the condition of my inner and outer environments.

I’ve come to a greater awareness of the complexity of the human mind. There are many factors involved in the co-creation of any environment, my thoughts being only one contributor. My thoughts certainly influence my perception and therefore play a part in my behaviour and in this way, are co-creators of my experiences. The conscious and unconscious neurological connections that I’ve made throughout my lifetime also play a role in determining my experiences, as do the conscious and unconscious connections and choices of those with whom I’m in relationship and community. As suggested in the opening quote of this section, by changing my mind, I do change my world because I begin to respond differently within it. This then influences my relationships, and reverberates throughout the web of life. However, I remain curious about the power of mind- and world-shaping without the influence of behaviour. Can thought alone influence the world? I see how this question is reductionist in principle, as I am attempting to separate thought and actions.

Recently and following my research, our local school board gathered its leaders to discuss the relevance of mindfulness in schools for the first time. While I acknowledge that several explanations are feasible – (a) word of my research got out; (b) the concept of mindfulness is being discussed in many domains; (c) mere coincidence; or (d) a synchronistic coming together of multiple possibilities – there is also the prospect that circumstances have been influenced by the individual and collective thought process. Gradually, and surely in co-operation with others, I believe it may be feasible to change the physical structures of the world
by changing our minds. Whether this influences our behaviours or actually triggers the “field,” (McTaggart, 2002) remains a mystery to me.

In my experience of this research, I’ve discovered that regular practice and consistent repetition are required to alter the habitual thought, feeling, and behaviour patterns I’ve acquired. Since the research ended, I have mostly maintained a daily mindfulness practice for thirty minutes per day. When I don’t practice, I notice how this negatively affects my sense of well-being; the practice has become a part of my daily hygiene. I have also infused mindfulness into my daily tasks. A regular practice has helped me to integrate mindfulness into other areas of my life. Sometimes I practice while I wash dishes, eat, walk with Beans, wait in a line-up, or listen to a friend. While I don’t always remember to be present, and I occasionally get swept away by an experience, I’m working to develop what Paulette talked about in our second circle.

To train...my mind to be able to do that over and over and over again so that it becomes a muscle memory. I feel the trigger then I start working on it or being aware of it.

The research process was transformative for me, as well as for some of the co-participants. Though not all co-participants experienced the same magnitude of change, they all reported having a positive experience in the circle.

One of my major insights was about belonging. My new focus is to practice sharing and growing with others. So, that is why I will stay in Jasper next year and it is the principle reason...I have a desire to change my image of the lonely one who is capable of doing everything on her own and instead to accept that I can’t do it all on my own. And even if I can do it on my own, it might be more fun and bring the creation further if I do it with other people...so I want to create with other people. (Marie-Hélène, closing interview)
I definitely got an insight about more compassion for myself. (Grace, closing interview)

The circle...scored points for the “wanting to trust and be open” side. It eased my pain. Collectively, we reduced the fear of facing each other openly, searching for the honesty of simply being and knowing who you are...this is what the practice is about. The circle brought this back to my attention. (Patrick, closing interview)

I was astonished how everyone opened themselves up...talking about emotions and feelings...everyone belongs, still we were very different, we had a lot of different people in the group but still there was a sense of belonging. (Alicia, closing interview)

The eight weeks for me...if anything what came forth for me was my work because, I really dichotomize what I do to earn money. I’ve almost separated that from my authentic self and I think that piece of myself...I’ve been allowing myself to let those parts of myself shine through [as a result of the research]. (Paula, closing interview)

Every single thing that happened in there, I really took it to heart and I wanted to really process it...for me it was really something I wanted to do for myself. It was great...I really enjoyed it. (Paulette, closing interview)

Following the research, I sense a genuine shift in the ways in which I experience the world. I mostly attribute this to a transformation of my beliefs about belonging, sensation, and identity. I more deeply trust that I am encompassed by an intelligent, supportive Universe. I can’t fix what exists outside of me, but I can choose to unfix my beliefs, and allow my inner landscape to change, breathe, and flow as the outer one does.

Prior to this study, I understood that I exist within an interconnected web of life, and that a practice of mindfulness would be beneficial. However, what I’ve discovered is far more than the intellectual knowing I receive from reading texts or writing papers. I have authentically
experienced belonging, even amongst the triggers of my discomfort. I’ve experienced what it is to sit with my discomfort and that of others, to become curious about it rather than judge it, even if just for moments longer than I did the day before. I’ve experienced the challenge of personal change, and how a daily commitment to a practice of mindfulness can support this change. I’ve experienced what is to more deeply accept and have compassion for myself, others, and circumstances, and to relax into what is. I’ve experienced the ability to return to my breath and to come to my senses when I’ve felt angry or frustrated with an event or person. Then as an outcome of being present, I’ve observed how conflict shifts and releases its hold. I’ve experienced the time and space that seems to manifest between our triggers and our responses. I’ve experienced positive shifts in my awareness, and in my relationships.

Through the personal and group research, I directly experienced what I read about during my literature review. I feel I’ve authentically embodied the story I’m telling; carrying it beyond the domain of intellectual scholarly research. The personal transformation that I and my co-participants have shared gives the research and writing I’ve done during the past year a deep meaning.

As I emerge from a metaphorical cocoon and prepare to fly into the world with fresh ideas, skills, insights, and knowledge, I continue to honour the neurological connections that I have nurtured this year. I remain mindful of old patterns, and gently deal with them as they arise. My heart and mind are open to opportunities that support me to continue to learn about, know, and live my purpose, my contribution to the whole.

Through the process of this research, I’ve come to feel my purpose is somehow related to art, love, home, and listening. One day, I wrote the words heart and art together to form the word heartheart. As I examined this newly coined word, I recognized hear the earth. I also
saw art, hearth, and heart. For me, the word hearth represents our shared home, the earth. As a personal theme of and struggle during this research, the art of listening has become significant. I sense there is some valuable wisdom for me in the words hear the earth, so I have incorporated them into my action plan (see Figure 5.1), my next steps.

I began this venture without expectations for specific answers. I believe this intention was reflected back to me by Paulette during our closing interview:

“I never felt...you had already figured out what you were going to say....You were willing to just open it up and if it was a colossal failure, then it was a colossal failure....You were strong enough and smart enough to realise that you were doing this as an adventure and that it was going to be okay....that what I have to go through, or what I’m going to share, or what I’m going

Figure 5.1. My Action Plan: Hear the Earth

Figure 5.1. During the final class of my Master’s program, we were asked to make a plan of action to follow the completion of our thesis. This is a representation of my plan. Learning to hear the earth is a part of it.
to learn is valuable to you, and that made me feel part of that community.” (Paulette, closing interview)

I’d like to bring this competence that Paulette speaks of, forward to other groups I work with in the future. I aim to remain open to the communication of others – human and other-than-human – in my community, and to co-create with them.

Implications and Potential Applications

An indigenous tale tells us about grandmother mole who suggests to Creator that he hide the most precious gift of all, the Great Secret, within us humans. “If the gift is within them,” grandmother mole tells Creator, “they will never find it, because they will never think to look there.”

An inspiration for this research was my sense that the environmental movement would benefit from looking within ourselves and going deeper into underlying reasons for our actions in the world. For the most part, we typically educate and communicate about the external landscape, and how our behaviours influence it. However, our behaviour is shaped by our deep assumptions and beliefs, and habitual connections in our brain. This inner landscape not only influences how we interpret the world but also how we behave within it. It is entirely feasible not only to train our awareness to consider the inner climate in addition to the outer one, but also to examine assumptions and old beliefs and to create new ones that inspire change from within.

Cosmology, eco-psychology, neuroscience, and mindfulness are exciting fields with great benefit to those working in the domain of environmental education and communication (eec). Researchers have already begun to combine the objectivity of neuroscience with the subjectivity of mindfulness in the search for a more holistic and complete understanding of the world. This

---

3 I first heard this story several years ago from a dear friend, Mike Lickers, an amazing storyteller. Paulette also brought the story to the circle during the group research.
trans-disciplinary movement appears to be a logical direction for eec. As Marie-Hélène stated beautifully in our third circle:

To have something that you never had before, you will need to do something that you never did before. And all is possible when we feel part of the universe.

Knowledge and understanding of the inner environment is a life skill. A regular investigation of the assumptions and beliefs we hold may be vital to the congruency of our implicit and explicit messages as educators and communicators. By not paying attention to interiority, we risk hypocrisy and a lack of credibility. It is not consistent to ask others to take care of the Earth’s eco-systems while we pay little or no attention to the one within ourselves. Mindfulness meditation, or any reflective practice, can assist us as we learn to care for both the inner and outer environments.

**Future Research**

The field of environmental education and communication would benefit tremendously from further studies of interiority and how it influences the external world. I was recently at an environmental education conference (North American Association for Environmental Educators) in Oakland, California. With over 400 sessions, I was intrigued by how few presenters addressed the inner landscape of those who are clearly passionate about the external landscapes we call “the environment.” We were almost 1200 people in attendance; a hefty crowd of knowledgeable environmental educators with tremendous amounts of wisdom about the world in which we live. Yet, I deeply questioned how many of us were comfortable with, or aware of, the world that exists within us? Despite the conference title *Gaining Perspective: Seeing EE Through Different Lenses*, very few of the sessions addressed worldviews, beliefs, emotions, or other aspects of interiority that influence our perceptions of the world, and thus our behaviour within it.
At one session, entitled *Cultivating Emotional, Social, and Ecological Intelligence*, the room was packed so full of people that we were seated on the floor and flowing out the doorways. Unfortunately, the title was misleading and we mostly heard about a relatively traditional description of programming. Following another successfully attended session about the psychosocial implications of environmental education, several of us engaged in a discussion about the positive response people have to learning about the inner landscape. We agreed that people are yearning to know more about the inner environment, and to integrate and balance our awareness of and work for the health of both the inner and outer landscapes.

I believe it is essential, especially for educators and communicators, to explore and cultivate the inner garden that was entrusted to us. What, for example, are educators’ and communicators’ own core beliefs about belonging in the world? How aware are we of the history of our beliefs about belonging, sensation and identity? How often do we grasp at worldly pleasures of peace and beauty, yet act from a place of fear and resistance to avoid the pain of a changing climate? How aware are we of how fear influences our ability to respond creatively? Where did our beliefs originate and are they still valid?

How might a practice of mindfulness influence the messages we deliver? Does an audience receive a message differently when they practice mindfulness? Are there ways, other than a practice of mindfulness, to heighten an inner awareness of the relationships and communications that connect us? What strategies help us to maintain a sustainable inner world? What further role can a cosmological and psychological understanding of the history our beliefs, mindfulness, and neuroscience play in environmental education?

These are my questions but others are asking similar ones. In the most recent *Alternatives Journal*, Breunig (2012) asks, "What might it mean to allow discomfort and despair
to coexist with the pedagogies of hope, which are more often central to changing environmental
behaviour?” (p. 38). This question is posed in response to McKnight’s (2009) claim that
“passionate inwardness provides the existential turn necessary to cope with the despair that
critical pedagogy illuminates and also might provide the tools to act in the world” (p. 500).

In a soon to be published chapter on prioritizing research questions in environmental
education, Reid and Scott (2012) discuss the ‘bald’, ‘blind’, and ‘blank spots’ of research. ‘Bald
spots,’ they explain, refer to “aspects of inquiry worn down if not literally depilated by having
the same questions or approaches unremittingly pursued” (p. 3), of which environmental
education has its share. The other two terms suggest a “generative strategy” (p. 3) for identifying
to explain:

Blank spots are what we know enough about to question but not answer; blind
spots are what we do not know well enough to ask about or care about–areas in
which existing theories, methods, and perceptions prevent us from ‘knowing’
what we don’t know. (Gough, 2004, p. 1)

There is a whole inner world to be explored, where both ‘blank’ and ‘blind spots’ await
our discovery. The inner landscape is as sacred as the outer one; our inner health is an integral
contribution to the well-being of the planet, though it is often the first to be pushed aside. Until
we experience a shift in our consciousness, which I believe can begin through an illumination
and examination of our assumptions and beliefs, it feels as though our environmental education
and communication efforts will do little to affect the impact of human behaviour on our
ecosystems. An exclusive focus on the outer world is out of balance and reductionist; as out of
balance and reductionist as an exclusive focus on the inner world. I propose that we are in need
of an integrative approach – one that addresses both the inner and outer environments. As we increasingly become aware of the inner world, I believe we will find we’re better able to influence major issues, such as climate change, from the inside out.

**Closing thoughts**

If the artist holds on to a preconceived notion of what the painting should look like, without responding to the possibilities suggested by the forms developing before her, the painting is likely to be trite. (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008, p. 208)

In writing this paper, I experienced a writer’s block so severe that it manifested in my body as gastrointestinal pain intense enough to send me to the emergency ward. Though the test results were inconclusive, I suspect it had something to do with me being “full of shit,” and afraid to “let shit go.” In other words, I constipated myself mentally and physically with my fixed beliefs about how this thesis would appear upon completion.

I longed to tell a story of the research findings in a unique, amusing, and creative way that would bring life to the message and joy to my audience. I vehemently resisted that I’m the person who follows the pack. I pride myself on the emotional and mental risks I take. I strive to maintain an identity as someone who inspires and who pushes boundaries; a “dangerous” (Narayaran, 2007) protagonist who shows others what’s possible. When I finally decided to let go of my grasp on this identity, my writing began to flow and my stomach problems cleared up.

Rather than a search for specific answers, this project has been a rite of passage, during which I’ve developed skills rather than conclusions. It has been “a plunge” (Halifax, 1999, p. 174) into the unknown. In the process, I’ve handed in my resignation from my teaching job, and let go of old beliefs and ideas about my identity; I’ve “let go of the life [I’d] planned so as to have the life that is waiting for [me]” (Campbell, 1991, p. 18).
In a space of not-knowing, I’ve borne witness to a “wholly different world” (Halifax, 1999, p. 174), where the “the relative and absolute are interdependent” (Halifax, 1999, p. 177). I’ve experienced an opening of mind and heart and realized that we all belong, even the triggers of our discomfort. I’ve become “one with the story” (p. 178) of transformation I’m sharing with you. I invite you to experience safety and belonging in not knowing.
References


Gordon, D. J. (2009). *A critical history of mindfulness-based psychology*. (Bachelor of Arts Thesis). Retrieved from http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1245&context=etd_hon_theses&sei-redir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.ca%2Furl%3Fsa%3Df%3Fsource%3Dweb%3Dcd%3D4%26ved%3D0CGkQFjAD%26url%3Dhttp%253A%252F%252Fwesscholar.wesleyan.edu%252Fcgi%25252Fviewcontent.cgi%25253Farticle%25253D1245%252526context%252526ei%25253D5L7ST6jZEOGA2wXasa25Dw%26usg%3DAFQjCNHW5Q7wgtAvOMpp4mrqyvagvasP9Q#search=%22history%20mindfulness%22


http://www.kenwilber.com/writings/read_pdf/1

Wilber, K. (2006b). *Introduction to the integral approach (and the AQAL map)*. Retrieved from

http://www.kenwilber.com/writings/read_pdf/34

Appendix A: Co-Participant E-mail Invitation and Job Description

Co-Participant E-mail Invitation

Hello!

If you are receiving this, it is because I thought you might be interested in participating in my Master's Thesis project at Royal Roads University with me this winter (late Jan through to late March) in a community of practice toward cultivating mindfulness and ecological belonging.

I am looking for 6-8 co-participants for my research. There is a time commitment (described in the attached job description), yet this is more of an investment in yourself than anything. The research will take place between the end of Jan and the end of March (it will be done prior to Spring Break for those concerned). We will have a 2-hr weekly meeting on Wednesday evenings (7pm-9pm) for eight weeks. The day is not written in stone yet and we will hold the meeting on the evening when the most number of people can join us.

I am seeking co-participants to do research with rather than on. This does not mean you have to write a thesis though, don't worry! It just means you will be a little more involved than having me poke you with a stick to see how you react. We will be sharing personal information with each other and the nature of the research methodology requires us to be as transparent and as honest as possible. For these reasons, I ask that my co-participants honour confidentiality and come with an open heart and mind.

The questions for research include:

- What experiences arise when we remain present in the moment, even with discomfort?
- What do we experience when we begin to question and modify the beliefs in which our impulsive and habitual reactions are rooted?
- How might fostering beliefs of belonging and unity alter our lived experiences?

So, let me know if you are up for it or if you have any questions! I would love to work with you in the cultivation of mindfulness and ecological belonging! Please feel free to pass this on to anyone you think might be interested in joining us.

Wild blessings!

Kim
Co-Participant Job Description

You:

• Can attend a half hour information meeting on Wed. Jan. 18, 2012 from 7:30-8:00pm. If you can’t come but want to be in the study, let me know!
• Are 18 years of age or older.
• Are mature and have meaningful experience with the research questions.
• Live in The Municipality of Jasper.
• Are currently engaged in communicating and/or educating about the environment.
• Are open to the possibility of inner transformation.
• Have the time and are willing to commit to a two-hour meeting every week for eight weeks. (Wed., Jan. 25 - Wed., Mar. 21, 7-9pm).
• Are willing to maintain a daily practice in mindfulness (beginning with 15 minutes/day and increasing by 5 minutes/week). You can take one day/week off if you’d like.
• Are willing to explore and experiment with a variety of practices that cultivate ecological belonging.
• Are willing to be transparent, honest, and open as you discuss your experiences with the other co-participants.
• Are willing to journal 2-3 times/week about significant experiences related to the research questions.
• Are willing to share your journal entries with other co-participants for research purposes.
• Are willing to honour the confidentiality of other co-participants and to participate with an open heart, mind and will.
• Are willing to consider the practices I have listed below and if so, you are willing to record the ones you adopt:
  • eat whole and nutritious foods while minimizing processed foods;
  • participate in regular exercise by way of a walk, a bike ride, a cross-country ski or other physical activity (3-4 times per week);
  • practice gratefulness and awe for the animate earth and all her creatures.

In return for your commitment, I will do my best to provide a caring, creative community to support you in your investment of time and energy into the cultivation of mindfulness and belonging. You will receive a journal that you may keep once the research is complete. Refreshments (tea and baking) will be served at the weekly meetings. Hugs as requested.

You may withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice. I just ask that you let me know.
Appendix B: Co-Participant Consent Form

Royal Roads University

Climate Change from the Inside Out: An Organic Inquiry into the Experience of Cultivating a Perspective of Belonging

Consent to Participate in Research

I, Kim Wallace, invite you to participate in a research study conducted for the purpose of receiving a Master of Arts degree in Environmental Education and Communication through Royal Roads University. Dr. Bob Kull is my Supervisor for this study and you may reach him at 604-####-####. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences that arise when we cultivate mindfulness and a perspective of belonging. The three research questions are

- How does remaining mindfully present, even with discomfort, influence my/our perceptions of and behaviours with others and the environment?
- How does illuminating and questioning my beliefs about the dualism of self and other, mind and matter, influence my/our perceptions of and behaviours with others and the environment?
- How does fostering beliefs of belonging and unity influence my/our perceptions of and behaviours with others and the environment?

DURATION AND LOCATION

We will meet weekly for two hours over eight weeks at the Habitat for the Arts on Patricia St. We will meet on Wednesday evenings from 7-9 pm from Jan. 25, March 21, 2012.

PROCEDURE

If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Come to all eight two-hour meetings. If you can’t come to one, let me know.
2. Post the three research questions in several places around your home and work so that you will be reminded of our intention several times per day.
3. At least three times per week, write in a journal about the experiences that arise from the research questions.
4. Engage in a daily practice of mindfulness.
5. Come to the study with an open mind and heart. At the weekly meetings, we will all be asked to experiment with free-verse poetry and mindfulness practices.
6. Honour the confidentiality of the other participants in the study. A major component of this study relies on an atmosphere of safety & transparency.
7. Be willing to have other co-participants read your journal entries.
8. Be willing to leave me with your journal at the end of the eight weeks for my research (you will get it back when I am done).
9. Be willing to share information that is collected from our journals and group sessions for the purpose of creating an interpretive script for the public. You may use a pseudonym.

10. Know that you are invited to co-write the script with me but that you are not obliged.

11. Be as honest and transparent as possible about experiences that arise throughout the study. Come to me if there is an issue related to the study that you do not feel comfortable with.

12. Be willing to meet with me after the eight weeks for 15-minutes to discuss your overall experience.

13. Read this consent form and ask any questions. Sign the consent form if you want to participate.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Risks involved in this study include the possibility of an increase in mindfulness and in your sense of belonging in the world. This study is not intended to act as therapy for any serious medical conditions. At no time during this study will you be asked to put yourself in danger of physical, mental, spiritual or emotional health.

**ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**

As a co-participant, you will become a member of a community of practice in the cultivation of mindfulness and belonging. I will give you a journal and at the end of the study, you will have recorded some great memories of our inquiry. You will also receive information and practice in various mindfulness methods. I will bring tea and baking to each weekly meeting.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

It is my hope that we will create a safe and confidential space for each other. The nature of the study requires this protection to ensure our maximum transparency in exploring the information that arises. Should you wish to use a pseudonym during the group meetings and/or in the thesis report, you may do so. When the research is put into an interpretive theatrical script, all identifying information will be eliminated. I may take photographs and/or videos and I will be audio-taping some discussions. If requested, your identity will be protected or disguised.

Your information will be kept confidential and secured in a locked office in my home. All data entered into my computer will be password protected. Your journals, which will be secured to maintain confidentiality, will be returned to you at the end of the study to do with as you wish. All other non-identifying data will be kept indefinitely to be used for future purposes such as published articles or professional presentations.

**RESULTS**

I will submit my final report to Royal Roads University in July 2012 in partial fulfillment for a Master’s Degree in Environmental Education and Communication. A copy of the final report will be published and archived in the RRU Library. I will provide each of you with a PDF version of my completed thesis upon request.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, this will not affect your relationship with me. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and
discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. Please inform me should you need to withdraw.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, any data or information pertaining to you will be destroyed upon your request.

If you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about this study, you may call me at home: 780-####-####.

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): ________________________________________________________________

Signed: __________________________________________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________________________________________

Witness: __________________________________________________________________________

Additional permission with initials of participant:

A) I give Kim Wallace permission to use my name in her research. ________

B) I would prefer that all references to me maintain my anonymity. ________
   a. The name I would like to be referred to in all data, including in the journals of other
      participants, is: _________________________

PHOTOS, VIDEOS, & VOICE RECORDINGS

I give Kim Wallace permission to use any photos, videos, or voice recordings in a public presentation once she has cleared them with me. ________
Appendix C: Handout for Co-Participants at Introductory Meeting

Research Questions

Please post these questions in visible locations so that you may ask them of yourself several times daily during the research. Your journal entries are in response to experiences that arise as a result of asking these questions.

- How does remaining mindfully present, even with discomfort, influence my/our perceptions of and behaviours with others and the environment?

- How does illuminating and questioning my beliefs about the dualism of self and other, mind and matter, influence my/our perceptions of and behaviours with others and the environment?

- How does fostering beliefs of belonging and unity influence my/our perceptions of and behaviours with others and the environment?
Mindfulness

Throughout the eight weeks, we will explore various ways for practicing mindfulness. There is no right method (some people would claim it is not a method but a way of being). Mindfulness can be practiced at any time of day, during any activity in life. Mindfulness is presence. It is dwelling in the landscape of the Now. It is employing your senses - all of them – to explore the present moment.

We will explore the use of several tools for practicing mindfulness. I ask that you record which method(s) you use (i.e. sitting, walking, body scan, beginner’s mind) in your journal.

Mindfulness can be thought of simply as the awareness that comes from systematically paying attention on purpose in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to what is closest to home in your experience: namely this very moment in which you are alive, however it is for you—pleasant, difficult, or not even on the radar screen—and the body sensations, thoughts, and feelings that you may be experiencing in any moment. (Kabat-Zinn, 2002, p. 1)

We will begin with a mindfulness practice of 15 minutes/day during the first week and increase this by 5 minutes/day each week to a maximum of 30 minutes/day. You are invited to practice for longer at any point in the research but please record your daily practice time in your journal.

Reflective Journal

I am providing each of you with a journal. In this journal, I ask that you record the mindfulness practice you have chosen to experiment with as well as any other choice of practice(s) described below. I also ask that you record how often and for how long you engage in the practice(s). Finally, I ask that you record experiences that arise as a result of the research questions.

Practices

I ask that you adopt the following two practices: (a) maintain a practice in mindfulness as discussed, at least 6 days per week; (b) record your experiences in your journal 3-4 times/week.

I also invite you to adopt these practices: (a) nourish your body with whole and nutritious foods and minimize processed foods; (b) participate in regular outdoor exercise (3-4 times per week); (c) practice gratefulness and awe for the Earth and all her creatures daily by consciously naming at least 5 ‘gratitudes’ each day (perhaps you record them in your journal or think about them as you go to bed or discuss them as you eat dinner with your family).
Recording Experiences

While recording your journal entries, please keep the main research questions in mind. For each entry, I invite you to:

- Focus on a description of a specific experience that arises as it was lived rather than to provide "causal explanations, generalizations, or abstract interpretations" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 64).
- Focus particularly on examples that arise from the research questions that stand out for their vividness.
- Attempt to describe your experiences from the inside...the feelings, the mood, the emotions, etc. of the moment as you lived it.
- Include metaphorical interpretations of your experiences to assist in writing from the sense-scape of your body.
- Attend strongly to how your body feels or felt during the experience itself, such as what you saw, smelled, heard, felt, etc.
- Avoid attempts to beautify with fancy phrases or flowery terminology.

“Use your senses fully. Be where you are. Look around. Just look, don’t interpret. See the light, shapes, colors, textures. Be aware of the silent presence of each thing. Be aware of the space that allows everything to be. Listen to the sounds; don’t judge them. Listen to the silence underneath the sounds. Touch something-anything-and feel and acknowledge its Being. Observe the rhythm of your breathing; feel the air flowing in and out, feel the life energy inside your body. Allow everything to be, within and without. Allow the ‘isness’ of all things. Move deeply into the Now. You are leaving behind the deadening world of mental abstraction, of time. You are getting out of the insane mind that is draining you of life energy, just as it is slowly poisoning and destroying the earth. You are awakening out of the dream of time into the present.” - Eckhart Tolle, The Power of Now
**Proposed Agenda**

This is a proposal and not much more. My need is that the circle helps me address the research questions and that I understand how I might analyse, synthesize and interpret the information. The relationships of the circle are primary.

**6:50-7:30 Arrival, meditation, check-in**

**7:30-8:00 Review of journals from previous week & poem creation.**

**8:00-8:15 Break**

**8:15-8:45 Sharing and discussion of poems**

**8:45-9:00 Closing**

**Circle Dates/Roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Jan. 25 (intro)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Feb. 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Feb. 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Feb. 15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Feb. 22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, Feb. 29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, March 21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With this Handout for Co-Participants at Introductory Meeting, I also included a two-page informational entitled “Basic Guidelines for Calling a Circle” (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010) that can be found at http://peerspirit.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/PeerSpirit-Circle-Guidelines2010.pdf
Appendix D: Literature Shared at Circle Meetings

The following are titles of the poems, as well as literature excerpts, we shared at each circle.

First Circle

Paula led the circle. There were no readings.

Second Circle

The Guest House (Rumi, 2007, p. 179)

“A total misinterpretation, a projection by a mind conditioned to see enemies and to make itself right or superior. At other times the fault may be there but by focussing on it, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else, you amplify it. And what you react to in another you strengthen in yourself” (Tolle, 2005, p. 62).

Third Circle

Wild Geese (Oliver, 1992, p. 110)

Lost (Wagoner, 1999, p. 10)

Fourth Circle

Sweet Darkness (Whyte, 1997, p. 23)

“Those who do not have power over the stories that dominate their lives, power to retell them, rethink them, deconstruct them, joke about them, and change them as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts” (Rushdie, 1991).

Fifth Circle

The Journey (Oliver, 1986, pp. 38-39)

Prospective Immigrants Please Note (Rich, 1993)
Sixth Circle

The Wind, One Brilliant Day (Machado, 1993, p. 57)

“Unhappiness is polluting not only your own inner being and those around you but also the collective human psyche of which you are an inseparable part. The pollution of the planet is only an outward reflection of an inner psychic pollution: millions of unconscious individuals not taking responsibility for their inner space” (Tolle, 1999, p. 67).

Seventh Circle

“Each senior level transcends and includes its juniors so that this Great Nest is a holarchy of extended love and compassionate embrace reaching from dirt to divinity with no corner of the cosmos left untouched by grace or care or luminosity” (Wilber, 2000a, p. 189).

“We are all the sons and daughters of a Godhead that is the Goal and Ground of every gesture in the cosmos and we will not rest until our own original face greets us with each dawn” (Wilber, 2000a, p. 190).

“Physicists have discovered that the apparent solidity of matter is an illusion created by our senses” (Tolle, 2005, p. 250).

“Breathing isn’t really something that you do but something that you witness as it happens” (Tolle, 2005, p. 245).

Eighth Circle

Community (Starhawk, 1997, p. 92).

Quatrain 91 (Rumi, 1984, p. 7)
Appendix E: Kim’s Writing & Co-Created Poems

The following pages include summative poems gathered from my personal journal, as well as several anecdotes, during the study (see p. 64 for description of methodology).

Where Am I? (November)

The water has long been gone
But has left its mark
And carved out a story in the land.

As my senses awaken,
The pain becomes more poignant.
It meets near my tailbone.
Behind me.

"Don't let her get away!" the past cries out.

I aim to pinpoint the exact source of the discomfort,
As an ocean of memories descends upon me.
I anticipate another wave will soon again flood me
With guilt.
I grab what is mine and hold it tight against me.
I become stuck in the sand. It's hard to move.
A pain in my upper back makes itself known
As the weight of the past accumulates upon my shoulders.

I am curious. Why don't I just let go?
What do I gain from
Grasping at the past?

I want to belong
In the present.
So I practice daily.
I want to wake up,
   And hear the possible future that calls to emerge,
   Not just the one I mindlessly stumble into.
   So I practice.

Can I practice without expectation?
   Am I now grasping at the future?
      What if I fail?
         What if I don’t?

   And then I take a deep breath,
      And gratitude fills my lungs.
I remember I am safe
   And I practice to release the grip I have
      on an identity that may not be mine.

   The November sun gently kisses my skin.
Coyote strolls by and yawns as its lunch flutters away.
Hummingbird whirrs by my ear and reminds me
   To savour the sweetness of the present moment.

   I am here. Now.

A Silly Proposal (December)

A silly proposal.
   I just don’t get it.
      Throw rocks at it.
I won’t fight to the death on this one but I see where the urge arises.
   Am I the alien?

   More! More! More! Never more acceptance of what is.
The tightness returns.
I’m not enough.
Not smart enough.
   Not good enough.
Rejection.
Sadness arises.
   Fear of being herded.
      Mindlessly plugged in.
Engulfed by fear, it grips my heart.
   A slave.
      I’m worked up.
When pain bodies congregate,
   Judgement becomes habit.
Jumping into rivers of shame and guilt.
   I replay what I could have said.
      Is it the ego that seeks reparation?
I just want to quit.
   Free shots of Johnny Walker.
   It’s easier.
What are you running from?
   Watch your step.
      “The moving walkway is deadly.”
Shine light on the shadow
   The Dark Teacher. Coyote?
Sunshine burns away the hold on anger.
      Power is my greatest asset and my greatest weakness.
I become curious rather than angry.
The quails search endlessly for grains and bugs
Like I search for words and clarity.
“Keep working it,” he reminded me.

A woodpecker called me outside at twilight.
Pink pillows billowed above.
Cloud angels.
The shadow of a hawk.
I felt invisible. A part of the land.

Back on Canadian soil,
The sweet sight of wild.
The beaver, a builder of dreams.

“Nothing is to be clung to as I, me, or mine.”
Recommended the Buddha.
Identity is entwined with the landscape.
Kill *my* identity.

I belong.
Feeling more compassion for the wounds.
“Mindfulness is a key to healing ourselves and our planet.”

**A Dream** (January)

A proposal to prostitute our Parks.
Jaw tightens. Throat is tight.
I forget to breathe.
Misrepresented. Over-exaggerated.
Ashamed. Embarrassed. Angry.

Disagree.
Act like jackals against
Different comfort zones.

I catch myself-tense and angry.
I realise what I’m doing.

Inspiring, delicious food.


A deep gratitude.

I want more outrage.

Chest tightens. Tightness. Throat closes.

Dizzy. Swirling energy.

I turn my attention back.

I’m sad because of how much I resist.

When I focus on negative, I feel negative.

I get wrapped up. I just keep going.

Time and energy

Being swallowed.

He interrupts me.

I look away and shut my interest off.

I tighten up.

An iron wall slams between us.

I harden like fat cooling on a roasting pan.

I walk away. Fuck it.

Break-off and release the tension.

Insecurity with the body I was born with.

This dislike is so painful.

Headache. Tense up. Heart in my throat.

Pain has been increasing.

I restrict.

I resist.

I put others down.
I become aware,

Come to make peace.

I don’t leave. I notice.

I wait. I watch.

I open my heart and my mind.

Maybe he doesn’t hear that I’m speaking?

He tries so hard.

I’ve gained a couple of pounds of love.

Heavy weight of irritation lifting. Grateful.

A genuinely beautiful feeling to see a shift.

An inspiration.

Cat shit on the blanket.

I yell.

Indignant and refuse to apologize.

I jump into the river of anger.

Not sure I trust.

I need integrity.

More calm.

Less attachment.

A part of me in the past is scared.

Ego worries about sulllying my identity as

Someone who is poised.

Still resisting.

I’m grossed out with myself.

Vulnerable.

I wake up confident.

I catch my thoughts before I drown

In fears of inadequacy.

The only thing that matters is the moment and being alive.
Nothing causes anything else.
Each interaction in the web has its own history and design.
Trust the process.

Pieces of the puzzle are naturally finding their way into the whole.

We live in a supportive Universe.

I don’t leave though I want to. I soften.
I watch it float away.

The passing nature of discomfort.

The work I’m doing is deepening my affection and respect.

I wonder if my chest is feels tight because my heart is growing?

I’ve never noticed this before.

Amazed by the beauty.

I experience my community by walking.

Friends. A listening ear.

Blue sky. It is crisp and sharp and clear.

I stop and gawk at the hoar frost.

Tingly feeling in my quads on a cold day.

Exciting. Invigorating.

A stronger sense of trust.

The brain and neuroplasticity.

A fairy portal. Stories of magic.

So many stories.

Synchronicity. Friendliness.

Creativity. Love.

Excited about the adventure

& surpassing the tipping point.

I practice going with it.
The Group Research begins and the summative poems are generated weekly during this time.

**Week 1**

The coyote was only a grey streak across my field of vision.

I was frantic, anxious, nervous, and eating poorly.

How am I going to put all of this together?

Trying to get everything done. Rushing.

I drank four beers.

A storm brews inside me.

Frustrated, tired, scared, and sad.

I’m not [good] enough. [Place any positive trait here]


Waves, tsunamis rushing this way and that.

Out of control.

They don’t do what I ask.

I get angry.

I tighten and grasp at control.

I totally lost it.

I pulled this way and that. Divisive.

An energy flowed through me.

I passed fire through my throat like a dragon.

I realised how loud I’d yelled.

My upper lip tingled.

I totally lost it.

Feel guilty for being a control freak.

I do forgive you, Kim. Healing.

The storm resided to rolling waves.

I felt them slow.

I waited. I did not speak.

And suddenly, the discomfort dissipated.
I have questions.
   Am I responsible?
   I feel responsible.
       To what degree am I accountable?
Where is the balance?
   See where we go.

Nature knows what She’s doing.
   Deeply trusting the magic of the circle.
       Supported by the circle. I feel strong.
           Clear, safe, trust, happy.
               Calm and relaxed.
       I’m in my community. Confident.
I ask them to help me cocreate.
   Gratitude fills me up.
       I feel supported.
           Nice to share time.
               Able to give back.
   My heart swells.
       I belong.

Week 2
Avoiding won’t help me.
   And analyzing interferes with my presence.
       I rush in to fix it,
           Trying to be careful.

Pushing buttons,
   And having my own fundamentalist buttons pushed.
Grasping for order.
   Frozen. Wind blowing.
A warm pain.
Hoar frost crystals,
like little skinning tools.
       Or diamonds glistening on a
       snowy blanket.
I stop to breathe.
     Thin ice breaking.
The cold makes my breath visible.
      Conscious.
        Crunching snow.
I need help.
     Hollow crunch.
Please assist me, Spirit.
       Silver snow.
            A crisp night.
Energy change.
I noticed.
I want to trust "different".
  Started my cleanse.
     The sky is clearing. Clearing.
     Fresh air. Bright moon.
      The Universe is conspiring.
             Impacting lives.
My dog, Beans.
        Her gentle snoring calls my attention.
         The sound of my partner vacuuming
              Captures my heart.
Flames. Laughter.
Crones. Masks.
Taking off our masks.
United we laugh
Comfortable, like an old friend.

Skulking coyote in the shadow,
Supported by the circle.
We breathe in and out the same air.

**Week 3: I Am**

A thread of hope severed by ignorance.
Whose?
Hooked on winning, on being right.
Nobody is right.
Nobody is wrong.
If nobody's right, who or what is left?

Distracted.
Wind. Blowing.
A dark day.

Fear of ridicule, of not being _____ enough (fill in the blank).
Is there enough?
Panic.
Other ways seem easier and less painful.
I can't do anything to help.

How do I accept the pain, my own and others'?
Trust the invisible consciousness. Together. Partnership.

Reach out with gestures of time and appreciation.

I love to work with people who feel their belonging - when I feel mine.

Core is sturdy and healthy. I'm supported. I am safe. I am loved. I love. I belong. I am free.


My roots reach firmly through the earth. I am connected.

**Week 4: Am I Listening?**

Hauling the heavy stories along,

Resistance and disdain for authority and structure.

Oh Coyote!

Fear of Coyote.

Coyote is dangerous.

Hunting for coyote.

Fight or flight? Or be present?

Be careful, Coyote.

I am her and she is me.

Respect each others' space and voice.

Burn the past stories and the masks of projection.

Attached energy is released. The weight has lifted...for now.

Cleared some air. Freedom.

Distracted. Is there enough?

Enough time, money, health, safety, focus, inspiration, support....

Anxiety welling up.

---

This smile was in the snow, along the side of a cliff in a canyon that I love to visit. I took the photo on a day I had spent with a photojournalist who was reporting on the Glacier Discovery Walk being accepted for development in Jasper National Park. We also saw a red fox that day.
Do you really believe you are supported and safe?

More, more, more. Distractions.
My house is dirty. Clean up.
Dirt, hair and dust congregate.
Cleanse.

Inner mirroring outer mirroring inner.
Where is my feather? Who is listening to me?
I cannot measure who my listener is...I must trust.
Give what you feel you lack.
I listened. I listened.

Who is listening to a Higher Energy?
Am I?

Surrender or persevere?
What would you have of me?

I'm listening...or am I?

**Week 5: The Mirror**

The fruitflies are in my house now.
Living in the past, resisting what "is,"
Multiplies quickly.
Sucked in by the Sirens.
I saw the acid get passed around the circle,
A dumping ground. A safe haven.
Dragged along through pain and sorrow.
How not to absorb other people's stories

---

Paula had fruitflies in her vermicompost so I brought mine to her place and we transferred all her worms in to my bin until she got hers cleaned out. I left her my bin for the meantime.

When Paula moved, she gave me back my worms. The fruitflies came as well but didn’t stay long.
And be confrontational in return?

I wait for something to change.

I am a fruitfly,
Adding acid and enzymes to covert what is solid.
Feeling unheard, no control. I fear.
Hijacked. The colonized becoming the colonizers.

"These stories are fruitflies."

Balance between persistence and annoyance?
Obedience & Freedom?
Cleansing what does not make me feel alive.
Whittle it down! Exclusion?
Polarities uniting.

Startled awake.
A force gently turns my focus toward the beauty,
The Light of the present moment.
Raven at my door.
Fingertips pinched by imaginary clothes pins.
Snow allows me to see what she smells.
I see. I watch. I feel the Light.
Jay calls like a crank with cogs.

Beauty surrounds me.
Great joy. Contagious enthusiasm.
I'm in it now.
Beauty fills and surrounds me.

I have a choice.
Week 6: The Round Table

I came across an opportunity along my way home.
    Just accept what is.

My neck is sore and tight.
    Not feeling fed. Hungry.
    Tired of being lazy.
    Attacked. My shoulder aches.

Help me! Help me! Help me!

When I awake, I know I'm safe.
    I pull the dog off.

I sent an application for money.
    I sent a concern.
    If a popcorn kernel is stuck,
        Get it out before it rots.

What if I change my role?
    Will they still be around?

I'm fed up with others' rotten garbage.
    I can smell it as it enters.
        This garbage dump is closed.
        Take your shit elsewhere.

Maybe it's do what you can and then accept what is.
    I send them off.

Feeling hungry.
    I'm not going back.

My legs shake as I stand my ground.
    Learning to use the past but not lean on it.
Allowing the sunlight of the present to shine through.

I handed in my resignation.

No sadness. No regret.

Just open doors in new directions.

The cave is well hidden,

Even in my dreams.

I want to go in again.

The peace of being alone.

Simple.

My dreams are speaking to me again.

The light glistens on the trees.

Many threads tie me into the lives of others.

I'm nourished in the circle.

Share these places. Create. Peace. Positive.


It's rippling beyond the Circle.

I belong. She belongs. He belongs. It belongs.

Feed others what you want to eat at the Round Table.

**Week 7: Dancing Polarities**

I keep trying to figure it out.

It won't be figured out.

I desire to fragment what I don't want from my life.

Yet points of view are met with polar opposites.

Too happy? Sadness and grief attempt to balance me out.

Stopped for speeding.

Money issues. Injustice. Not enough. There is enough
Small. Big.
United. Alone.
Embrace. Retreat.
Naked. Covered up.
Judged. Repress the shadow. Keep everyone happy.
    Juxtaposed. Integrate.

No parts. Only wholes.
The rhythms of life.
Desire whole consciousness.
Welcome grief and complaints into my home.
What I resist, persists.
Truth telling with gentleness. It's just my truth.

Memory Lane shame.
I've grown. The trees have grown.
Yet the memories are frozen in time.

I get so itchy. And I scratch.
It is what it is.
Back to the present.
Sensing. New beginnings.
Keep me present.
    SO GRATEFUL.
Exercise outside.
Blue Jays, Woodpeckers, Chickadees.
Whole body filled with life.
A miracle.
Integrate.

I'm getting taller.
Week 8: Surprise!

Truth telling.

A doorway.

Can't see where I'm headed.

Frustrated by a lack of transparency.

Afraid to go over the next descent

Down into the darkness.

Really steep slopes.

I wish I had the courage.

Deceit. Cries of pain.

Missing some information.

My identity has been swallowed up.

The shadowy creatures of my dreams,

There's no light down there.

Let her back up!

I slide sideways into a barrier.

I'm waiting for light.

I wrote to express my disappointment.

Tell my truth.

Complaints. Busy!

I listen with a closed mind and heart.

I don't want my energy to leak out.

Remember this avoidance.

Resistance to hearing another's truth

Driving me.

Adjust the rearview.

I should check.

"The deeper the layers, the sweeter it gets," she told me.
The only word God knows is Yes.

   Laughter
   Helping me to release my role.
   Coming home.
   More time to be less structured.
   Good belly laughs.
   Light.

A circle continues.

   Family.
   For the rest of life.

The Waterfall

   While I originally wrote the following story in 2005, it is especially poignant this year.

The water that feeds the river I write about in this story is at its most powerful in twenty-one years. This summer, the river has washed out bridges with concrete foundations.

   I have updated the story to reflect my current understanding and beliefs but I have not rewritten the story.

   I had recently spent the summer leading French tours through the Rockies and had passed by the Maligne River several times with the groups I led. The river is an amazing source of power and force throughout the summer months. Most marvel at Her beauty and power, myself included.

   The Maligne River is a natural wonder. As one of the largest underground karst systems in North America, when the glacier melt slows down in the fall, the river bed appears empty in spots. Of course, the river does not disappear, it simply runs underground. What we see above ground in the summer, is an overflow of water from the karst system.

   There is one particular waterfall along the river that is now my favourite spot to visit. I began to pay close attention to this spot after one client told me the waterfall spoke to him. When I asked him at the time what She had said, he replied in French, “I don't know. She only speaks English.”

   When autumn arrived that year, I felt lost. I had spent the summer immersed in what I love:
facilitating relationships between humans and the wilderness. That had come to an end however, and I was unemployed. I was scared and felt empty. For whatever reason, it occurred to me to go back to the Maligne River to visit the waterfall that had apparently spoken to my guest.

I arrived at the waterfall and took a seat on a tree root that was exposed by the force of the Maligne during the summer months. The river bed was dry, which was difficult to imagine when I remembered the force that had roared through only months earlier. Alone, I observed the similarities between the river bed and myself. Empty. Powerless. Cold. Lacking direction and with a loss of force.

Nothing at all like anything I had experienced before, the following words arose in my mind, “Like you, I appear empty. Unlike you, I do not fight the flow.” The voice went on, “When spring arrives, I will once again experience my full force. Meanwhile, I accept my apparent powerlessness, knowing that true force is happening where you cannot see it. This is part of the cycle. It is natural and healthy. It is of no use to fight or resist it.”

From this day forward, when I experience what I imagine to be emptiness, or powerlessness, I remember the day the river shared Her story with me.

The photo on the left was taken by the brother of the man who told me the waterfall had spoken to him. It was snapped at the end of the season, in September 1997, when the water was beginning to slow.

The photo on the right was taken last October, 2011. It was during the same time of year that the river shared Her story with me, thirteen years earlier.

Photo credit: Vincent Munier, 1997
### Appendix F: Timelines and Methods Adopted During Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Personal Practices</th>
<th>Co-participant Practices</th>
<th>Group Meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date Range</td>
<td>Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 22-Mar.6</td>
<td>30min Tonglen/sitting mediation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 22-Mar.6</td>
<td>30min Tonglen/sitting mediation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 7-Mar.21</td>
<td>30min. loving kindness meditation. Writing. Gratitude. Eating: well Exercise: 3-4x/week The only confirmation I have that these were done is 4 co-participants Experience Journals, and their word.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 7</td>
<td>30min. loving kindness metta meditation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 14</td>
<td>30min. loving kindness metta meditation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 21</td>
<td>meeting: open. Co-participant’s choice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of recorded personal research: Mar. 30, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: Closing Co-Participant Letter and Interview Questions

Hello dear friends/research participants!

First, please get yourself a tea, or a glass of wine and find a comfy chair...I need you for a few minutes.

This "analyzing" was a heck of a lot of work yet it was very rewarding to witness as the themes came to life and popped out on their own as I drew mindmaps galore. Of course, since coyote made himself so apparent throughout the research, I'm still wondering what the catch is.

So, now, I need each of you to do 3 more things for me (wow! I owe you big time!)

1) If each of you could scan through the themes below and let me know if there are any themes that did not seem like themes in your experience of the research or if there were themes that did not appear on this list. I essentially want to know if we participated in the same research and am seeking your validation that it makes sense...BUT PLEASE tell me if it doesn't!

2) I have also pasted my summary of the interpretation of the themes below and explained (in rough draft format) how they all fit together. Please have a look through this and let me know if the summary resonates for you, leaves you confused, or what other reaction you have to it. Maybe take notes about your reaction?

I have attached a Word document with each of the themes and proof of these themes from our meeting transcriptions. I did not capture all the proof but I feel I did get a big chunk of it. You might be intrigued to peek through it.

3) Make a meeting time with me where we can discuss the research findings and any final items you would like to discuss. I will ask some closing questions such as the three main research questions (How does being present, even with discomfort, affect your relationships? How does investigating your beliefs affect your relationships? How does fostering a belief in belonging affect your relationships?) as well as:

- Did you gain more compassion & depth of understanding in your relationships with self, others and environment?
• What conclusions have you come to as a result of our research together?

• What shifts or transformations did you experience during the research (in relationships, in beliefs)?

• What was your experience with mindfulness prior to the research?

• What benefits did you gain from participating?

• Would you recommend mindful practice to friends and family as a method for humans to live more sustainable on the planet?

• Will you write my thesis for me?

Thanks everyone! I will contact you for interviews or you can send me a time that works best for you! I have a voice recorder so we can walk while we interview...and maybe see coyote! Paula's already in for Thursday evening.

love and peace,

kim

PS. If possible, I would like to hold on to your journals for a wee bit longer. If you need/want it back, just let me know and it's yours.

Themes:

• Relationships in community (people, nature, Devine, Ancestors), connection, belonging – apparent and not so apparent, can transcend time and place.

• Communication - apparent and not so apparent (i.e. linguistic/non-linguistic), can transcend time and place.

• Sensations (inner-subjective/outer-empirical) – physical/emotional/spiritual/ mental (i.e.: pain, suffering, discomfort, love, ease, comfort)

• Fears

• Response to fears/discomforts: opening up/closing (like a door)

• Shifting beliefs
• Space inner/outer (territory, boundaries)
• Time
• Water metaphors
• Stories from the past (identity), myths
• Dualism/encompassing (paradox), sides, polarities, dance

Summary

Living systems exist as a community of relationships. Some of these relationships are evident, others are not empirically measurable. Still others exist in between and are apparent to some people but not to others. Any relationship is linked by the communication of those in relationship. While relationship and communication are listed separately as two themes, they are very closely intertwined.

Relationships appear to be stronger when the method of communication used is understood by all parties in the relationship. As with relationships, some communication is empirically measurable, while some is not. Communication is reciprocated in relationships though the methods of communication are not always the same. Some examples of communication include: dreams, ideas, visions, silence, language, symbols, drawing, and laughter. The Ancestors communicate with us using a different method than I use when I call a friend on the phone.

Like a cell is a living entity in a heart, so too is a human a living entity within a community, a community within the planet, and a planet within the cosmos. Members, some of which are more apparent than others, are nested within their communities along with each other. Together, these members co-create a community.

We learn our beliefs through the communication in our relationships. Just as a human can communicate with a cell, so too might the All Encompassing Divine communicate with a
human. Our beliefs, which are transient and pliable, may be planted and nurtured through more obvious relationships in our community, such as with our parents, teachers or friends. Or they may arise as a result of less obvious measures such as through cellular memory or cosmic downloading. These acquired beliefs, which must be different for each person since no two people can live the exact same experience, effect our perceptions, and inevitably our relationships.

Miscommunication within relationships can cause great discomfort at the human to human level or at any other level of relationship. Imagine if all communication was in a language that we understood completely; communication with the Divine, with the animal or plant world, or even with our life partner might seem so much easier. We might then be permitted to relax into a situation more readily or to engage our fight or flight response only as required. This is not how it is, however, and so we continue to experience discomfort in our relationships, usually as a result of a miscommunication.

One human belief, perhaps once a survival mechanism passed down to us from our ancestors through cellular communication, appears to involve the avoidance or escape from discomfort. When we encounter a stress inducing stimulus within a relationship, we tend to shift into a state of fear. When this happens, the amygdala, a part of the brain responsible for fight or flight, takes over and we find ourselves unable to remain open to the present moment and to the various communications of the world around us that whisper possibilities for new, and often more suitable, responses.

The practice of mindfulness, the act of being present in the moment, is one tool that might help us as humans to relax the amygdala and allow us to remain open to new solutions and possibilities, which we are typically closed to during a state of perceived threat. If mindfulness
is a useful tool, it seems clear that we will need to practice it a lot as many of its tenets are
dissimilar to the mindless, habitual patterns adopted by so many people in western society.