RESTORING AWARENESS:
Stories of Childhood Experience and Ecological Identity

By

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ABSTRACT

In trying to understand ecological identity within adult environmental education, I embarked on an arts-informed exploration of my life history. I realized that everything I know about the environment grew from what I experienced as a child. My childhood experiences are most vivid in my memories of the natural world. I wanted to know more about the relationship between childhood experiences and ecological identity. Based on a personal transformation, and journey toward restoring awareness of the senses and how we know as human beings, I chose my life as the focus of this research.

Had my childhood experiences influenced how I relate to the environment? How had they done that? What was it about those childhood experiences? This thesis is the culmination of my inquiry. It is my story and an offering to travel with me to my childhood and make sense of your own experiences in the natural world.
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INTRODUCTION

Before I left Toronto, Canada and returned to Nairobi, Kenya, my childhood home, to conduct the research for this project, I wrote to my parents to tell them about my intention to revisit my childhood – about my inquiry into the relationship between my childhood experiences and my ecological identity. I realized that my childhood is not separate from their identities and presence in forming my childhood experiences. I wrote to tell them that in traveling back to my childhood I expect to explore our shared histories. I wanted them to know what I planned to do and expose my role as a researcher in this inquiry.

I started a Master of Education degree at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in September of 2006. The first course in the program, Introduction to Transformative Learning, dealt with global social justice and environmental issues like international trade, climate change, and child labor. Reflecting formed a large part of our learning in the course; writing down our thoughts and reactions to what we collectively read and anything we experienced between classes. My experience of the course was transformative and restorative.

1 Thomashow (1995, p. xiii) describes ecological identity as the way that “people perceive themselves in reference to nature, as living and breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth, the biogeochemical cycles, the grand and complex diversity of ecological systems.”

2 “Transformative learning develops out of a cognitive disequilibrium or a disorienting dilemma” (Lange, 2004, p. 122).

3 Lange describes restorative learning as the recovery of “suppressed values/ethics and forgotten relations” (Lange, 2004, p. 135).
discussion, and resource reviews I restored my foundational ethical framework and became an active participant in social justice issues.

Everything we learned about environmental issues disturbed me. How as a species we have put our own survival at risk.\(^4\) I started to think about how I relate to the environment. I fed my curiosity about environmental education by participating in micro actions; journaling my thoughts and meetings with the non-human world; talking to my friends and family about climate change, organic and local food markets, and water conservation. I attended “green” protests and seminars. I found that most environmental awareness in the western world stems from social, economic and political realities.\(^5\) While these realities are fundamental to any society, I believe that they do not embody a holistic approach to environmental issues. Dominant western societies have focused on addressing climate change from a “secular-scientific-rationalist-humanist worldview”\(^6\) rather than the question of human purpose on earth, and have yet to make significant strides in addressing the issue. In light of sound scientific data, a large population continues to live in denial or despair. It struck me that the solutions to ecological problems are cultural as much as they are political. They are weaved in the ethical fabric of communities. I began with myself. I looked at my own roots in order to understand my values and ethics, my capacity to change and become more ecologically conscious.


\(^{5}\) Knowles, 1992.

I wrote statements about the environment. What I remembered, what I believed, how it made me feel. Anything I could think of. When I first noticed a tree and when I first heard water. When I first smelt a fireplace and when I first tasted a mango. When I first felt the wind. I thought about my childhood. I loved being outside as a child, going on President's Award trips, exploring the grounds at Green Acres Boarding School, camping in Naivasha. I realize that everything I knew and believed about the environment grew from what I did as a child. My childhood experiences were most vivid in my memories of the natural world and at the core of my attachment to the environment. I wanted to know more about my relationship to the natural world.

Had my childhood experiences influenced how I relate to the environment? How had they done that? What was it about those childhood experiences? This text is the culmination of my inquiry.

Rooted in qualitative research processes, I embarked on an exploration of my life history. In describing the broader purpose of the life history approach, Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles said, “it is about understanding a situation, a profession, condition or institution through coming to know how individuals walk, talk, live and

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7 President’s Award (PA) Club is the East African member of the Canadian Duke of Edinburgh’s Award that includes a combination of community service, physical recreation, and leadership development activities for youth.

8 “The universal hallmark of childhood is the sense of wonder aroused by the meeting of body, mind and the environment” (Porteous, 1990, p. 154).

9 A key component of life history involves the “exploration of a life through recounting memories of experience and the meaning attributed to them” (Cole & Knowles, 2001 p. 60). See more on life history in Appendix: Methodology.
work within that particular context.” Based on my recent, personal transformation and journey toward environmental consciousness, I chose my life as the focus of the research and used this approach in an effort to understand ecological identity within adult environmental education. I include in the Appendix more on the research process and details of the methodology.

Given the ecological cost of travelling to Kenya I questioned the need to travel back to my childhood home to complete this research. However, I did not want to compromise the transformative power of physically returning to my childhood. Accessing the smells, tastes, sounds, sights and feelings of my childhood. Thomas said, “to know is to inhabit, to experience the world intimately, through the body, through the senses, through embodiment.” I wanted to know my childhood through my senses, through an embodied experience. I needed to honor how I learn as an adult and how I knew as a child.

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10 Knowles, 2001, p. 11.

11 “Environmental Education, as it applies to all aspects of environmental studies, must strive to integrate three interconnected domains of knowledge: content, process and reflection. Content is the information that flows through a system, the relevant phenomena of a system or object of study, the extrapolation and observation of relevant data. Process refers to the ways that people share and use information, the relational context in which learning occurs, the way information is represented. Reflection is the personal or collective interpretation and contemplation of information, its psychospiritual implications, its deep meaning” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 172).

12 Thomas, 2004, p. 68.

13 “Children still know in an embodied way, relying on their somatic and affective knowing as a primary source of information” (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996, p. 3).
My intention for this inquiry is layered. It begins with my personal need to understand the relationship between childhood experiences and how people relate to nature. My feeling of responsibility to speak for that which cannot speak in a human-centered world. It is to encourage a different way of knowing in the spectrum of adult environmental education.\(^\text{14}\) A way of knowing through the senses and experience, where I ask the reader to travel with me to my childhood home and reflect on her own childhood experiences in the natural world. It is to create a space that questions and therefore potentially restores the values\(^\text{15}\) between adults and the environment. It is to foster an awareness of individual ecological identity. It is to invite a meaning-making\(^\text{16}\) process that illuminates the impact adults have on the environment and on children. It is to influence the nature of experiences adults facilitate for the children in their lives\(^\text{17}\) and, therefore, influence the ecological

\(^{14}\)“My impression is that people may arrive at this perspective from two different, but connected paths. For some, it is a cognitive understanding of scientific ecology that leads to this (ecological) view. They use this knowledge as a means to extrapolate principles for living and as a way to understand their place in the world. Yet some people arrive at notions such as interconnectedness and interdependence from a purely experiential perspective…. Of course these different approaches are not polarities, they merely reflect two differently ways of knowing. What is crucial is how these approaches inform each other” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 20).

\(^{15}\)Elizabeth Lange (2004, p. 135) says in order to survive disorientation (experienced through transformative learning) one needs “stability.” The recovery of “suppressed values/ethics and forgotten relations” (gained through restorative learning) provides that “stability.” Therefore, the relationship between transformative and restorative learning “constitutes an important pedagogy for sustainability education.”

\(^{16}\)“…Meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation” (Abram, 1996, p. 75).

\(^{17}\)“The current generation of children are some of the most disconnected from nature in our history…. Perhaps such thoughts can be brushed off as nostalgic or sentimental, but when
identity of future generations. My intention of this inquiry is to share my story and contribute to the body of adult environmental education.

Using expressive writing and visual art, I chose an arts-informed\(^\text{18}\) approach to life history research. I chose this approach to honor the depth of experience, of my experience throughout the research process and of your experience as the reader.\(^\text{19}\) I strive to create something that makes senses beyond an academic lens and reaches a broader audience. I invite a unique and meaningful experience that makes sense to each reader, where making sense is both understanding the context of my life history\(^\text{20}\) as well as being guided by the senses throughout the inquiry.\(^\text{21}\)

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\(^{18}\)“Arts-informed research is a mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the art broadly conceived” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59).

\(^{19}\)“The language of the academy and all that it symbolized fell short in it’s ability to capture and communicate the complexity of human experience in all its diversity” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59).

\(^{20}\)“…Context is crucial to making meaning of people’s stories and understanding their experiences. The life history approach explores interesting stories of social, political, cultural, historical, and psychological context” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 226).

\(^{21}\)“…A story must be judged according to whether it makes sense. And “making sense” must here be understood in its most direct meaning: to make sense is to enliven the senses. A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. To make sense is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one’s felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are” (Abram, 1996, p. 265).
MAKING SENSE OF CIRCLES

Widening the circles of identification proceeds as a form of exfoliation, a peeling away of layers, a breaking of perpetual boundaries, allowing for more expansive circles of awareness. Opening the windows of memory prompts looking deep within as one might peel the layers of an onion, the removal of each layer bringing you closer to the core. These are dynamic, connected, concentric circles, with each layer representing another aspect of ecological identity.22

In trying to understand how my childhood experiences influenced my ecological identity, I discovered that my experiences exist in “circles of awareness.” The context of my childhood experiences fostered an ecological identity that is grounded in my sense of spirituality and expresses both a physical and emotional awareness of my relationship with the natural world. I tell my story through “circles of awareness.” Each circle connected to the next, each circle unsure about where it begins and where it ends, each circle whole and fluid, holding a part of my ecological identity.

Circle One: Who Am I?, reveals the complexities of my personal and ecological identity. It holds my family and the social, economic, political and cultural contexts of my childhood.

Circle Two: *Beads on My Tasbih*, illuminates my childhood experience of spirituality. It holds the significance of ritual and spiritual grounding in my ecological identity.

Circle Three: *Breath of Hope*, exposes the emotional relationship I developed with the non-human world to build and sustain resiliency as a child. It holds my strength and means of survival.

Circle Four: *Placing Memories*, digs into my physical relationship with creation. It holds my sense of place.

Circle Five: *Rediscovering Home*, brings me back to the beginning and traces my learning before, during and after my journey from Toronto to Nairobi and back. It holds the future of this work and the fluidity of each circle in my ecological identity.

Hehaka Sapa, or Black Elk, of the Oglala Sioux said:

> Everything the power of the World does is done in a circle….The Wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round…. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The
life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood and so it is in everything where power moves...  

The cyclical nature of my personal inquiry inspired me to further infuse the power of the circle in the representation of this work. I create a pattern that spirals through the work and honors the reflexive process. Each circle begins with a visual expression of that particular circle and then spins together a narrative of my childhood experience and a reflection of my relived adult experience of that circle. Throughout the connected circles I derive meaning and make sense of the experiences as they inform my ecological identity.

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24 “Being reflexive in research means engaging in an ongoing process of reflecting ideas and experiences back on oneself as an explicit acknowledgement of one’s locatedness in the research” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 42).
Oil on cotton canvas sewed on a straw basket. 12 x 7 in.
On June 22, 2009, Aish, my husband and I landed at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, Nairobi, Kenya. As we waited for the plane to glide into a gate and rest, the flight attendant’s voice rang in the speaker above me, “… ‘Those of you returning to Nairobi, welcome home! And to those of you visiting, Karibuni (welcome to) Kenya! We hope that you have a pleasant stay and thank you for flying with Kenya Airways.’”

I reached into the pocket on the back of the seat in front of me and grabbed my journal. I stretched the brown leather string around it and tucked it in my backpack. I pushed back into my upright seat. The man behind me shuffled his carry-on bag under me and unbuckled his seatbelt. Aish and I waited for the rush to settle and stared out the window. I noticed the stained, concrete terminal buildings, dry acacia trees spread along the horizon and the bright yellow lines on the cracked tarmac runway. Am I returning home – or visiting?

Warm, fuel polluted air greeted us off the plane and replaced the stale recycled air that lingered from the eight hour flight. We wandered into the International Arrivals Terminal, passed the single duty free store infested with curios and African masks, and waited in line at the customs counter. The customs officer, a heavy black man dressed in a pale army green shirt and cargo pants, exchanged jokes with his colleague at the next counter and took his time with every exhausted traveller. A pylon of used invoice books towered above the counter.
I thought about the next two weeks in Nairobi and revisiting my childhood.25

The coming Friday I planned to join a group of twelve-year-old kids from Premier Academy, the high school I attended as a teenager, to hike across the tea plantations in the eastern region of Kenya for my second President's Award gold expedition.26 I wanted to revisit places where I played when I was little, do similar activities again to evoke memories of my childhood, and come to understand some of the strongest influences on my life. I wanted to search through old photographs and artifacts27 that Mum collected in a cardboard box under her bed. I wanted to go to familiar childhood places, like the City Council Farmers' Markets, Pangani Khane,28 and Green Acres Boarding School.

I thought about everything that I hadn’t planned and didn’t know about the next ten days.29 I felt drained, anxious, and hopeful.

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25 “The purpose of revisiting the special places of childhood is to gain awareness of the connections we make with the earth, awakening and holding those memories in our consciousness of the present” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 9).

26 Bronze, silver and gold levels of the President’s Award were progressively challenging such that the Gold expedition (part of the physical recreation requirement) was a 100 km hike over three days.

27 “Documenting a life is the purpose in collecting artifacts and their value is that they may enrich insights and clarify questions or perplexing issues. An artifact is a physical object. It is something that can be handles and observed. I usually has a temporal quality, meaning that it “speaks” of actions at a particular time and place” (Cole & Knowles, 2001 p. 85).

28 See Footnote 43 and 44.

29 Other than the President’s Award expedition I had not planned any activities for the period of this research and approached the visit knowing that “the development of a sound life history project is likely to arise from a combination of intentional, rational, and intuitive thinking and action coupled with unplanned, fortuitous experiences such as those that are serendipitous” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 57). “Researchable moments” are serendipitous.
We stepped up to the counter and slipped the officer our passports and one hundred U.S. dollars for our visitors’ visas. He looked over at his colleague and asked for an extra invoice book. The other officer shook his head. Mwangi, the name etched on the gold plated tag that dangled on the officers’ chest, sliced the stack of used invoice books on the counter in front of him and flipped through each one. Aish glanced at me puzzled. I smirked. Ten minutes later, half way through the tower, he found a book with a blank invoice. “Visitors visa for two”, he scribbled on the brown paper, ripped the carbon copy beneath it, stamped the passports and tossed it all on the counter.

“Asante (thank you),” I slid the passports off the counter and walked towards the baggage claim.

“Karibu (you’re welcome),” the officer stood up, sucked his belly back under his belt, stretched his arms behind his head and meandered to the washroom.

By their very nature they are happenstance. They cannot be predicted. They present opportunities, to see into the inner reaches of meaning of a life” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 78).
Shhh, said the little girl.

I slipped away from a little girl’s hands and drifted on a river that curled and spiraled and scurried and flowed, a river that lived. Until a storm of wind whipped me away and launched me into a space caressed by butterflies and birds and leaves that blew from a tall Oak tree, a tree that lived. I flew and spun and soared until I settled on a plush white cloud. I pondered. Does the cloud live? I played and rested and churned into a ball of water that soaked through the cloud and dropped into the space caressed with butterflies and birds and leaves. I splashed past the tall Oak tree and knocked on the little girl’s window. Shhh, said the little girl.
CIRCLE ONE: WHO AM I?

Nisha Haji, 2010. Who Am I?
Primed cotton canvas sewn on a straw basket. 12 x 7 in.
KUTHANGARI

Njoroge, one of the teachers from Premier Academy, and I arrived at Kuthangari, a small rural village in the Aberdares, Kenya, before the group of school children travelling with us. We sat on a rock parallel to the dirt road. Dust from the road tinted the sheet metal and plastic kiosk across from us. Cave-like drawings of stick men and trees decorated the bottom of one of the sheet-metal walls. It was the second day of the President’s Award hike and my sixty-liter backpack felt like an anchor latched on a reef. I savored the fleeting break.

“So, tell me about the work that you are doing,” Njoroge said in his strong African accent.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I understand you came back to Kenya to do some research. What are you doing?” he inquired.

“I am trying to understand how childhood experiences help people relate to the environment.” I paused. “You know, like how going on President’s Award trips when I was in school changed how I think about the environment.”

“Cool.” He adjusted the straps on his bag.

A young black girl, about five years old, peered out of the door at the kiosk on the other side of the road. Her blue skirt hovered above her dusty knees, the white on her checkered blouse had lost its starkness. She tucked her chin under, bit the fingernails on her left hand, and stood with her bare feet turned inward. She noticed me watching her. She giggled and hid inside the dark kiosk.
“Did you go to Premier when you were here?” Njoroge continued.

“Yeah, for ten years.”

“Wow, that’s a long time. So you started school there?”

“No, I was at Green Acres Boarding School in Limuru before Premier.”

“Are you serious?” Njoroge’s eyes widened and eyebrows rose.

Dad’s childhood friend, Ashraf Uncle from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania came to Nairobi to drop off his daughters Zahra and Salima to Green Acres Girls Boarding School and convinced Dad to send me there. I joined Green Acres when I turned seven. Green Acres, built on a tea plantation in Limuru, was about two hours away from our house in Parklands. Most of the girls at Green Acres came from Tanzania and knew each other from their home. I stayed in school each week. Mum and Dad picked me up for the weekends. After two years at Green Acres Mum noticed my dull eyes and protruding ribs and wanted me to come home. I left and switched to Premier Academy, the newest private school in Kenya.

“Yeah, this place really reminds me of Green Acres. It’s so quiet and green,” I convince Njoroge. A delicate blue and black butterfly ruffled over my knee and landed on my shoelace. I leaned over, shook my foot and scared it away. My white shoelaces had turned bleak red and blended in with the road.

“So tell me something. Why do so many people of your kind go to Canada?” Njoroge’s African accent deepened.
People of my kind? Ismailis? I chuckled. “I am not sure. My mother stayed in Canada when I was born. After year thirteen at Premier I wanted to go to University. I guess it made sense for me to go to there.”

My parents’ immigrant history started in rural Tanzania. Nanabapa (Mum’s father) passed away with cancer when Mum was nine years old. Nanima (Mum’s mother) was eight months pregnant. She sewed and cooked for a living. When Nanima remarried seven years later Mum abandoned her childhood home. Dadima (Dad’s mother) was sixteen when she gave birth to Dad. She struggled to nurture him and Dad grew up with Neetafai, his widowed aunt, and Baa (my great grandmother). Mum worked as a secretary and Dad worked a mechanic. They met in Dar-es-Salaam, the capital city of Tanzania, when Mum turned eighteen. They got married a year later. Dad was Hindu. Mum was Muslim. Their families did not support

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30 “Ismailism is a part of Shi’ite branch of Islam whose adherents constitute at present a small minority within the wider Muslim ummah” (Nanji, Isma’ilism, 1987, p. 1).

31 “He (the Aga Khan, religious leader of the Ismailis) advised many followers to send their children for higher education in Western Universities” (William, 1988, p.195). At a time of prosperity in East Africa, many upper and middle class Ismaili parents in Kenya sent their children to London, the United States and Canada after high school. This, the fact that my mothers’ family still lived in Canada and affordability informed my parents decision to send me to Canada for university.

32 “Immigrant groups are created by specific legal decision, economic opportunities and social forces that bring them into existence and shape them at a certain place and time” (William, 1988, p.2).
their marriage and Mum and Dad eloped to Mombasa on the coast of Kenya. At twenty Mum was pregnant with me and travelled to live with her grandmother in Calgary, Alberta.

I was born at Grace Hospital in Calgary at 5:50 pm on Thursday May 7th, 1981, a Canadian Citizen. In the winter of 1981 Mum and I went back to Nairobi where Mum and Dad had settled after a short spell in Mombasa. At twenty-one Mum became pregnant with my little brother Ali. In 1999 I returned to Canada in pursuit of post-secondary education.

I looked up for the little girl. She snuck back out and swayed her arms beside her body like a woman in a church choir. Njoroge yanked the sprouts of grass that scattered around us and sprinkled the road.

“So you went to Green Acres. Did you live in Limuru or something?” His eyebrows collapsed.

“No, we lived in Parklands. 6th Parklands. My Dad’s friend’s kids went to Green Acres and he thought it would be a good idea for me to go to a boarding school.”

“Oh. 6th Parklands. Have you been there recently? It has changed a lot. So many shops and big apartment buildings.”

“Yeah, we drove by our old house on Monday. It was really different.”

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“Even for those who can return to pleasant memories, a dark side will inevitably emerge. The great majority of my students have experiences similar to the international group (those from war-torn places) – their childhood places are in some way polluted, developed, or destroyed, and they are overcome by impressions of emptiness and loss” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 12).
The Parklands community spread across six blocks in suburban Nairobi – from 1st to 6th Parklands. Although each block showcased its own set of housing complexes Parklands generally represented the middle class, Indian immigrant community of Nairobi. The neighborhood bridged a path from the city to rural Kenya. Many of the local city workers travelled on public buses from their villages through Parklands on their way to and from work. The Aga Khan Sports Club, Aga Khan Primary School, Aga Khan Hospital and City Park Famers Market scattered between 3rd and 4th parklands united the community.

Most of my childhood memories exist in a three-bedroom, two-story house, behind a patch of deserted land and down a small hill off 6th Parklands Road in Nairobi. A small stream flowed at the bottom of the hill. The blue and white house shouldered two other blue and white houses. A bushy fence and metal gate sealed off the complex. We lived in the first house, the Desai family lived in the middle, and a single middle-aged man, Shashi Uncle, lived in the last house. The servants quarters, where Anna, our maid, and her family, Evans, the gardener, and Dorothy, the neighbors maid, lived, took up a small corner of the complex. Priya, Rakhi, Neil, Ali, Kavneet, Kioko (Anna’s son) and I played in the gardens around the houses everyday after school.

Every morning after she woke us up for school, Anna pegged our hand-washed clothes on the clothesline in front of the house. Evans watered the rose bushes, ferns and birds of paradise in the garden. Morning dew sparkled over the
grass when we left for school. When we got home in the afternoon, Anna ironed the clothes from the morning. Evans washed the cars, helped Dad install a satellite dish or loaded the Toyota Land Cruiser with the new shipment of TVs that arrived for Dad’s new business partner. Ali and I gobbled supper and scampered out to play until the sun settled and the night guard strolled by or Mum called us into the house.

I heard the little girl laughing. She leaned on the door at the kiosk again. An old man appeared from the dark doorway behind her. He balanced on a walking stick and wobbled around the girl, across a patch of grass to another rock by the road. He dropped the walking stick on the ground, pulled his pants up at his knees and slowly bent back to take his seat. He gazed at Njoroge and they swapped nods.

“Here they are,” Njoroge pointed at Otieno, David and Miss Onsado. The rest of the teachers gathered about a hundred meters away at the path leading to the tea plantations. They waited for the kids that followed. I heard the kids approaching.

“Miss Onsado, this is too far. We need a long break here,” they groaned about the early morning trek.

Njoroge laughed and sprung off the rock. As I strolled toward them I glanced over my shoulder, past my lime green backpack and caught the girl waving. I waved back.

We walked through Kuthangari to the closest inlet back in to the fields. Njoroge led the way, I paired up with Otieno and the groups straggled behind with David and Miss Onsado. The crisp morning chill softened, warm air from dying fire
pits wandered between the web of kiosks and crossed our path. The sound of our
dead weight stomping through the village echoed in the aged Kuthangari trees that
showed off broad silver trunks, heavy exposed roots and brittle hanging branches.

Otieno wedged in front of me as we entered the narrow trail. I paused and
paced at the bright green carpet of tea plants that covered the land as far as I could
see. I felt calm. I spotted a row of women picking tealeaves on the hill ahead of us.
They wore colorful headscarves and bright knit sweaters that jumped out like an
orange carrot on a fresh snowman. Sisal and black rubber baskets hung over their
heads. I remembered Anna’s headscarf and the Mama Mboga’s (literally vegetable
women) that came home.

Even on cold and rainy days Mama Mboga’s charged through the gates of our
house and yelled “Mama (mother of) Nisha, Mama Nisha.” They announced what
they offered that day, “Mama Nisha, Iko viazi, iko nya nya, iko githeri (I have potatoes,
I have tomatoes, I have beans).” Mama Mboga’s roamed the neighborhoods in
Nairobi, with harvests from their suburb farms hanging in a sisal basket off their
covered heads. They travelled together and sometimes carried the same vegetables.
Mum popped out of the house with a pocket of shillings, sifted through the baskets
of day-old fruit and vegetables and stocked up until their next visit.

“Mama Priya, Mama Priya,” the Mama Mboga’s moved on to the Desai’s
house.
Every few weeks Anna bought Sukuma Wiki\textsuperscript{34} and dashed to her house, the servants’ quarters, to stash it away. Some evenings I escaped into Anna’s house to watch her cook, before George, her husband came home from work. Anna sat on a footstool, flipped a red plastic bucket upside down and placed a block of wood on top of it. She chopped the Sukuma on the wood while the kerosene stove filled the room with fumes. I sat on the floor. A torn floral bed sheet hung across the middle of the room and separated the kitchen and living room from the bedroom in Anna’s house. I recognized cut outs from last years calendars splashed on the unpainted walls. They trapped dust, grease, and memories. When Koiko came through the door I knew George was at the gate and I hurried home.

Sweat dripped down my spine to my lower back and soaked into the cushioning on my backpack. I reached for the stainless steel water bottle I purchased before I left Toronto. A cow mooed in the field and a trace of fresh cow dung dawdled in the air. I hopped up on a rock to scan the fields but the cow rested away from the mid-day sun, somewhere between the maze and beneath the bushy tea plants. Otieno walked faster. He peaked behind to see how far I lagged. I jogged to catch up.

“Where did you do your first Gold?”

“At Premier.”

\textsuperscript{34} Literally, Kiswahili for “push the week,” Sukuma Wiki is a collard green that is a staple local food in Kenya. The name implies that the food made from the collard green is usually stretched to last a week (Kitchen Gardeners International, 2008).
“No, I mean where did you hike?”

“Oh, Ngong,” I coughed.

“Wow. Ngong is a challenging trek,” he said. I smiled.

Premier opened in September of 1989, just when Dad’s import business started to prosper and he could afford to send my brother and I there. I began with the first Year Five class. I remember everything about Premier, the classrooms, the fields, the swimming pool, the cafeteria, the principal’s office, the chemistry labs, the library, the teachers, the art studio, and the hallway where Alim and I first held hands. I took Physics, Math and Art for “A” Levels.\(^\text{35}\) I loved art and did well at Math. With Physics, I thought I could be an architect when I grew up. In Year Twelve Mrs. Fernandez, the career counselor, asked us to think about applying to University. University? Mum and Dad trusted Mrs. Fernandez to help me figure out what I should do. I applied to the University of Western Ontario, University of Toronto, and University of Alberta in the Bachelor of Arts program. I was accepted at all. Dad thought Toronto was too big. Edmonton was too small. I moved to London, Ontario in 1999. Dad’s fruitful business peaked a few years ago and I applied for a national student loan.

Mum and Dad knew someone who knew someone in London. That someone was Shamshu Popat. Shamshu Uncle, and his wife Mary Aunty retired in London and

\(^{35}\) Advance Level General Certificate of Education, based on the examination board of the United Kingdom and offered at most private schools in Kenya (Wikipedia, GCE Advanced Level, 2011).
lived in an old house off Bur Oak Drive. A bright green shag rug covered every square foot of floor, bold floral wallpaper coated every wall and dust enveloped every surface of Shamshu and Mary’s house. I stayed with Shamshu Uncle and Mary Aunty until the end of September when I found a place closer to campus and started my adult life.

During the school year I got accepted in the “work-study” program and worked as a receptionist at the Registrar’s Office, a Gallery Assistant at The Can, and a clerk at the Robarts library. I completed a Bachelor in Arts in the spring of 2003. Torn by the politics of the art world and in search for financial stability I moved to Toronto to find a job.

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We are getting close to a small town,” Otieno observed. “Do you see the candy wrappers and plastic bottles on the ground?” I noticed the litter buried in the red mud.

“I have been meaning to ask you, I understand what you are doing here but why are you interested in this topic?” I recalled what I had shared with Otieno at the fire last night.

“I don’t know.” I paused. “I guess I just think that people don’t care enough about the environment. I felt like I needed to figure out why I care so much. What made me care, and try and do something about it.”

“I know what you mean. I am working on a project in the slums in Nairobi,” Otieno shared.
“Really? What’s it about?” Otieno told me of a project that he started to protect water in the Kibera slums of Nairobi. He told me that he grew up in Kibera. The Nairobi River flows through the Kibera slums and he wanted to educate people on how to keep it clean and save the only source of drinking water. I thought about all the water trucks I saw in Nairobi a few days ago. Dad heard that landlords were shutting off water in buildings and promoting water shortages. They made extra cash if they opened their gates to the water trucks.

“Do you work in Canada?” Otieno distracted me.

“Yes, I work for the government there. I manage training programs. Nothing as exciting as you.”

“Hmm. I am sure that it is exciting.”

I spent the first three months in Toronto helping out at a high-risk childcare center. The long commute and emotional drain of working with abused children exhausted me. I accepted a position with the Ontario Public Service in the field of Adult Training and Learning. My professional practice involved educating largely immigrant populations on their legislative responsibilities as new business owners. Still attached to Nairobi, the position triggered my passion for international development and adult education. I wanted to learn more about the synthesis of cultural diversity and community development. With a full time job and financial obligations I applied to the Masters of Education program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).
I remember sitting in a Transformative Learning course hearing about all of the environmental problems and feeling helpless. It felt too big. Too complicated. Like nothing I could do would help. I wanted to help.

By the end of the class I uncovered my social, economic, and political privilege. I saw the post colonial influences throughout my childhood in Nairobi and my unconscious economic privilege that allowed me to go to a private high school and university in Canada. I realized that privilege during childhood is a blessing and a gift that parents work hard for, but since the beginning of my adult life I express my privilege through my freedom to choose and freedom to act. I make choices everyday. What to eat, what to wear, where to go, what to do. Choices expose my privilege. Choices might help, might make a difference.

I learned that privilege and the freedom to choose comes with responsibility. That political action is not restricted to voting ballots and anti-war protests. My choices are political. My choice to do this work and ask questions of my childhood experiences is political and embedded in my worldview. As the researcher in this work I also participate in a political action to support the survival of all creation\textsuperscript{36} and take responsibility for my privilege.

\textsuperscript{36} Carl Leggo said “in my writing, I am writing ‘who I am’ and engaging in a political endeavor to acknowledge that the personal and the public are not only never separate, but are in fact, as ecologically and organically connected, as the two chambers of the heart (2004, p. 20).”
Women, men and children sang in a small plywood church at the end of the trail. Otieno whistled to the hymn. Three young women skipped down a perpendicular path and met us on the trail. They nuded each other and whispered.

“Kathongo,” I heard one woman say. I glanced at Otieno.

“They want to shake your hand.”

“What?” I stood baffled.

“They think that you are a Mzungu (white) and want to shake your hand.”

The women stopped before me and one of them reached out to shake my hand. I felt awkward. I raised my hand and gripped her soft hand.

“Muna enda wapi (where are you going)?” I asked.

She jerked back. They all laughed. The woman on the left dazed at Otieno and responded “Kanisa (church).” Otieno warned them that they have five minutes to the service and they rushed past us.

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“White”? My backpack? My shoes? My hair? The touch of my skin? I struggle to make sense of “Kathongo” in the eyes of the women I met on the trail in Kuthangari. Some days the thought of the experience makes me feel empty and alone, like a stranger at home. Some days I feel flattered and blessed, like we shared a deep and innocent exchange. I don’t know why. Could it be an unconscious insecurity about “whiteness” in a post-colonial world? The unspoken power dynamic that I long to destroy. Maybe I feel judged or misjudged about my sense of place in Kenya.
Offended by the distance they placed between us. Maybe I feel honored to share hope with a woman I do not know and may never see again.

What did they identify as “white”? What does identity mean? Visiting, returning to my childhood home taught me that identity is interlaced. I realized that identity is not just my name, date of birth, or biological parents.

I remember moving to Toronto, meeting new people and being in a new place. What is your Dad’s name? What does he do? What is your background? Where are you from? People always asked complex questions. I always struggle to respond.

My Dad’s name is Karim Haji. He use to be Mukesh Gajjar. He converted to Ismailism when I was born and changed his Hindu name. He imported electronics and installed satellite dishes when I was a little girl. Mum and Dad now live in Mwanza, Tanzania where they run a small seafood store. I am a Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim.

37 “Still, the greatest problem for those immigrating from one social setting to another is the maintenance of their identity. The dilemma they face is to preserve their identity with the essential continuity of self and at the same time accommodate that identity to the new setting with the necessary correspondence between them” (Williams, 1988, p. 32).

38 While “the advice of the Aga Khan to his followers in Africa paralleled the advice he gave those in Burma: To identify themselves as politically and culturally with the outlook, customs, aspirations, and way of life of the people among whom they lived,” (William, 1988, p.195), I found that it was almost a mandatory custom for first generation immigrants in Canada, specifically older members of the Ismaili community, to ask me about my roots in Kenya and establish a connection. A mutual person we both knew, a familiar place we both went to or a time that we shared in history.

39 People are generally born into and acquire a religion based on their cultural and social surroundings (Suzuki, 2006). At birth, my parents pledged my allegiance to His Highness the Aga Khan, the Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Imami Nizari Ismailis. Therefore making me a Shia Imami Nizari Ismaili Muslim (or Ismaili). “…Part of the religious duty of Ismailis is an oath of allegiance (bai’at) to him (the Aga Khan). The oath promises obedience to the official guidance of the Imam and involves a recognition that the believer’s person, mind and possessions (tan, man and dhan) are to be used in in “the way of Allah” in accordance with
often went to a Hindu temple as a child and participated in Hindu religious ceremonies. I am from Nairobi, Kenya. I am Canadian by birth and citizenship. I am a daughter, the older of two children. I completed an undergraduate degree in Visual Arts. I am completing my Master's in Education degree. I work for the provincial government at the Ministry of Revenue.

What is your Dad’s name? What does he do? What is your background? Where are you from? I realized these questions are about identity. Who my father (and mother) is, what they do, and where I come from reveals a strand of my interlaced identity. What I do, where I live, what I eat, what I buy. Is that part of my identity?


If identity is my values and beliefs, then my values and beliefs are grounded in my spiritual relationship with nature. I learned that my personal identity stems from my ecological identity and that my ecological identity encompasses what I believe

the Imam’s guidance” (Williams, 1988, p. 199). Bā’at is a performed on a child at birth at the will of the child parents and becomes the first identification of the child’s religious background.

“Being from a particular region (or feeling that you are from a place) matters in a few concrete ways…you realize the essential connection between where you are and who you’re with and who you are and what you do” (Kett, 2009, p. 95). In a new place, I contemplated and appreciated being from somewhere.

“Ecological identity refers to all the different ways people construe themselves in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self. Nature becomes an object of identification. For the individual, this has extraordinary conceptual ramifications. The interpretation of life experiences transcends social and cultural

My identity is interlaced. What I eat, what I buy and what I believe is woven in a social, economic, political and cultural context. The context of my middle-class, minority childhood experiences illuminate my life and therefore my identity.

My inquiry into the relation between childhood experiences and ecological identity then, stems from the knowledge that who I am, those values and beliefs, came to be during the middle years of my childhood. My journey to travel back to childhood is rooted in understanding what aspects of my childhood memories and experience (circles of awareness) informed my ecological identity, my values and beliefs.

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42 “From the perspective of human development, the period of middle childhood (ages 9-12 years) is a time of place-making in which children expand their sense of self” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 10).
CIRCLE TWO: BEADS ON MY TASBIH

Ink pen on watercolor paper and a photograph.
JAMATKHANA (KHANE)\textsuperscript{43}

Mum, Dad, my little brother Ali, and I took off our shoes and raced through the Pangani\textsuperscript{44} Khane courtyard toward the grand wooden doors. Mum and I walked in from the doors on the left. Dad and Ali walked in from the doors on the right. A volunteer escorted Mum and I through the prayer hall to an empty space in the third row. I scanned the boys from across the hall and lagged behind. Pretending not to notice the volunteer’s gaze, I squeezed in on the floor between Mum and a woman in a pink, orange and golden Indian suit. The pink on her outfit matched my frilly princess dress. Mum bought the dress for my seventh birthday. I remembered fighting Mum earlier on to let me wear it. I smiled. Mum dug through her black leather purse to find the Tasbihs\textsuperscript{45} while I spread my dress across the floor, careful not to disturb the woman on my right.

“Please recite the Holy Salwat,”\textsuperscript{46} announced the older man parked at the podium at the front of the room. The podium divided the boys and the girls.

\textsuperscript{43} “The term ‘Jamatkhana’ literally means ‘a house of assembly or gathering’. Specifically, it has come to designate a gathering space for community activities and for devotional practice among a variety of Muslim groups such as the Musta‘lian and Nizari Ismailis in certain parts of the world” (Jiwan, 2006, p. 6). Khane is commonly used among Ismailis in East Africa and parts of the Western world as a short form of Jamatkhana.

\textsuperscript{44} A municipal region of Nairobi, Kenya.

\textsuperscript{45} Tasbih “is a form of Dhikr (or Zikr, "Remembrance [of God]", "pronouncement", "invocation").” In its physical form a Tasbih is a string of prayer beads “most commonly made of various stones or wooden bead, but also of olive seeds, ivory, amber, pearls or plastic” (Wikipedia, Tasbih, 2010).

\textsuperscript{46} My personal understanding of the recitation of the Salwat is that it is a prayer and the believer's acknowledgement of the Aga Khan as the present and living Imam.
“Allahuma salli ala Muhammadin wa aale Muhammad,” the crowd responded. I tucked my feet under my bum and got ready to pay attention. My frilly pink dress shivered. He pushed his glasses up his nose, peered around the room, first to his left and then to his right. He paused.

“My beloved spiritual children,” he read, “I would like you to remember the concept of zahir and batin in Islam. You must remember that the only thing that is eternal is the spiritual world and that you must balance your material and spiritual worlds.”

I felt a tug on my arm. Mum handed me my pink Tasbih. Pink like my dress. I leaped, crossed my legs and unraveled my princess dress, holding the pink beads tightly in my hand. A strong scent of dying matches and lavender incense swirled

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47 O Allah! Bestow Peace on Muhammad and his Descendants.

48 “Throughout their history, the Ismailis have been led by a living, hereditary Imam. They trace the line of Imamat in hereditary succession from Ismail to His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, who is their present, 49th Imam in direct lineal descent from Prophet Muhammad through Ali and Fatima” (Institute for Ismaili Studies, 2008).

49 “Traditional cosmogonies necessarily deal with the relationship of spiritual and material realities, one which lies at the heart of all religious understanding of nature. Philosophically speaking, most religions posit the existence of two “worlds,” one spiritual, immutable and absolute, the other material, mutable and relative…” (Oldmeadow, 1998, p.14). Similarly, zahir which refers to the material world and batin which refers to the spiritual world is a principle of Ismailism where “…matter and spirit exist in a state of complementarity” (Nanji, 1987, p.17). The Aga Khan defines this relationship in the Ethical Framework of his institutions, the Aga Khan Development Network, as din and dunya. “Din is the spiritual relationship of willing submission of a reasoning creature to his Lord who creates, sustains and guides. For the truly discerning, the earthly life, dunya, is a gift to cherish inasmuch as it is a bridge to, and preparation for, the life to come. Otherwise it is an enticement, distracting man from service of God, which is the true purpose of life. Service of God is not only worship, but also service to humanity, and abiding by the duty of trust towards the rest of creation” (Institute for Ismaili Studies, 2000).
around us, through the air and up toward the towering ceiling. I gazed up and imagined the incense smoke rise. I imagined it escape through the streak of colorful windows on the wall, bounce on the heavy wooden beams that staggered across the ceiling and settle on the sparkling chandelier that hung low and lit up the room.\footnote{Pangani Khane, like many Khanes across the globe, was built with principles of Islamic Architecture that allowed for a symbolic relationship between the physical environment and the spiritual experience. The Aga Khan places significant value on the aesthetics of Jamatkhana and says that the “interactions that take place within those environments, reverberate our spiritual life” (1979, p. 2). He goes on to describe the attention to “kinaesthetic experiences in Islamic building,” and states that “there is a play upon the senses – air current touching the skin, the sound of moving water, the touch of various textures, the richness of colour and the play of light and shade upon the vision, the scent of plants in the courtyards, are the touches of the paradise to come” (1979, p. 4).}

I looked down. I placed my Tasbih on the floor and noticed the beads form a squiggly shape. I pushed, pulled and swayed the string that bound the plastic beads together and made a perfect pink heart on the straw floor.

“Carry your Tasbih with you wherever you go, call the name of Allah,\footnote{Name of God in Arabic.} call...” the old man read from the Firman\footnote{“The official communication (firman) of the Imam to the community, through which development and the modernization of every aspect of the life of Ismailis has been encouraged, are internal and a matter of privilege between the Imam and the community, so the exact nature of the guidance is not revealed to those outside” (William, 1988, p. 204). “...It can be seen that such caution and secrecy have been effective in protecting this small minority of a minority that is somewhat exposed in volatile area’s of the world” (p. 2). The Firman being quoted in this narrative is based on my personal recollection and may not be identical to the language in any given Firman.} at the podium. I swept my Tasbih off the floor and peeked at Mum. She closed her eyes and rolled the glass beads of her black Tasbih against the inside of her thumb. One bead at a time. What is Mum thinking about?
“Please recite the Holy Salwat,” he said again.

“Allahuma salli ala Muhammadin wa aale Muhammad,” voices blended and echoed in the room. I squished my eyes together. It felt silly. I don’t know what Mum is thinking about.

After about half an hour, and a million Tasbih shapes, Khane was over.

“Where’s your Tasbih?” Mum asked. I unwrapped it from my wrist and gave it back to her. She tossed it in her purse, snapped the purse shut and stood up.

“Let’s go do Niyaz,”53 she said.

As I followed Mum to the Niyaz line I felt a tingle shoot down my leg. Mum says when that happens it means my leg fell asleep. How can my leg fall asleep? When we got to the Niyaz line, Mum cradled me in front of her and stamped a shilling in the palm of my hand. I locked the shilling in a tight fist. The short woman standing in line in front of me swung her purse into her sweaty armpit and almost hit my face. I frowned. Her dress is ugly. I felt Mum’s hand on my shoulder when we made it to the front. I dropped the shilling in the silver tray on the table,54 picked up a pyali,55 blinked, started at the girl sitting behind the other side of the table filling up the

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53 Niyaz refers to water that is used in the Ismaili ritual Ab-i-Shifa (“sacred water” in Persian) or Ghat-pat. The term Ghat-pat “is a compound derived from two Sanskrit word ghat (a vessel for water) and pata (denoting a space or specific place to be used for something), and refers in Nizari Isma’ili ritual, to a ceremony where a vessel containing “sacred water” is places on a low, long dais-like table, from which adherents drink, after recitation of the Dua (prayer)” (Nanji, 1978, p. 204).

54 A monetary offering is an optional part of the ceremony however, like many other elements of this oral tradition, I was not able to locate published literature or scholarship on it.

55 Smaller ceramic vessel used in the ceremony to hold water from the Ghat-pat for each person that participates in the ritual.
pyalis, said “Firman,” and gulped the water. *Hmmm.* The cold sip of water soothed my dry mouth. I shuffled to the side and watched Mum. She hunched over, reached for a pyali, hugged it in her left palm, closed her eyes for a few seconds, *What is she thinking about?,* opened her eyes, waited until the girl sitting across looked at her and then whispered “Firman.”

> “Ya Ali, Ya Mohammed,” the girl said back. *She didn’t say that to me.*

Mum joined me at the side and we moved toward the door.

> “Do you see your Dad?” she asked.

> “No, do you want me to go look for him?” I offered.

> “No, let’s check outside,” she replied.

> “I can check inside and you can check outside,” I tried again.

> “I said no, Nisha.”

I spotted creases in my dress. I frowned.

> “Mum. Mum, what does *zahir* and *batin* mean?”

> “What?” Mum said.

> “That old man said, I want you to remember *zahir* and *batin,*” I remind her.

> “There’s your Dad,” she said, “let’s get our shoes.”

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56 While not documented, reciting the word Firman before drinking the “sacred water” could be symbolic of the acceptance of the Imam’s guidance and official role as the spiritual leader of the Ismailis (Nurani, 2011).

57 O Ali, O Mohammed.
Mum and I strolled past the open courtyard toward the shoe room. I looked up at the stars splashed across the black sky. We slipped on our shoes and walked to the boys. Mum, Dad, Ali and I wandered to the car and Dad drove us home.

On the way home Mum and Dad caught up on who they saw in Khane while Mum pealed off her clip on earrings, beaded bracelet and long necklace. I listened. Ali flicked the door handle, then the seat belt, then the door lock, and finally the back of Dad’s seat.

“Ali, stop that” Dad snapped. I giggled and Ali turned toward me. I looked down and patted the frills on my dress. We remained silent the rest of the ride home.
MAKING SENSE

Mum and I went to Pangani Khane on our third day in Nairobi. Dad stayed at home with Aish. Even though there were three Khanes in Nairobi we always went to Pangani Khane. Mum thought Parklands Khane was too snobby. All the rich Ismailis in Nairobi went to Parklands. Town Khane was simpler but it was in the city and not really safe at night. So we came to Pangani, the in-between Khane. We drove down Limuru Road past City Park Market and Aga Khan Secondary School, around the roundabout, past Gymkhana Sports Club and a big new Hindu Temple. The gate looked the same but greeted us closed. Mum flashed an “Ismaili” identification card at the guard and he let us through. Security in Nairobi was so tight that we “got carded” to get into Khane. We parked and walked toward the courtyard that still framed a patch of the indigo sky. The the stars hid that night. We took off our shoes in the same spot and crossed the courtyard. I squeezed my Tasbih out of my black clutch on the way in. Mum and I started a new row in the middle of the room, on the empty carpeted floor. The space felt open, wide, and vast. I crossed my legs, secured my Tasbih in the palm of my right hand, and rested my wrists on my knees. I turned my palms to face the ceiling. My Tasbih loosened, pivoted on my middle finger, and dangled between my thumb and index finger. I skimmed the colorful windows and glanced up at the wooden beams. I sucked in incense-infused air, released my stomach and closed my eyes.

I reflected. I remembered our day, going to our old house and eating sugar cane that we bought from a vendor on the side of the road. My Tasbih slipped out of
my hand and dropped. I opened my eyes and nudged it closer to me on the floor. I placed my bare palms on my knees and shut my eyes. I felt the ripple of my knees through the wool of my black pants. I listened. I heard a cough in the back of the room. A woman. Older I thought, from the roughness of the sound. Clank. Clank. Clank. The glass beads on Mum’s Tasbih. Water. Running, splashing and collecting. Being poured into pyalis on the tables that lined the left wall. I felt a whiff of air stroke my arm on the left. Someone sat beside me. A sweet fragrance invaded my nose. I opened my eyes.

“Please recite the Holy Salwat,” a young girl asked at the podium. Same podium. Her hair fastened back in a firm braid. I remembered when Mum used to braid my hair for Khane.

“Allahuma salli ala Muhammedin wa aale Muhammed,” I responded. I listened.

As Mum and I lined up in the Niyaz line she handed me a ten-shilling coin. I smiled. At the front of the line, I bent my knees and added the coin to the naked silver tray. I heard it tinkle. I reached for a pyali with my right hand. I placed it in the middle of my left palm and held it still with all my fingers. I closed my eyes. I said thank you for the day, the air, and all that I am blessed with. I pled forgiveness for my lack of awareness and asked for peace. I drank the water. I moved out of the line, stepped to the back and waited for mum by the exit at the wooden doors.

On our way home Mum tuned in to 88.0 Sound FM and focused on the dark roads. I glared out the window and thought about Niyaz, Firmans and my Tasbih. I thought about Khane.
I realized how as a little girl I looked forward to the days we went to Khane. How religion shaped and did not shape my sense of being.\(^{58}\) How religion reminded me of the concept of batin.\(^{59}\) My spiritual relationship to something, to creation and the Creator. How I longed for the time to listen. Be silent. Share silence with a crowd of people. To hear things in a different language and wonder what they mean. Make my own meaning.\(^{60}\) Be reflexive. Have my own thoughts. Think about my purpose on earth, my connectedness to the incense and the floor, and to the beads on my Tasbih.\(^{61}\) I loved wrapping the pyali in my hand like a precious stone. As a child the

\(^{58}\) Religion, in my case the Shia Imami Nizari Ismaili interpretation of Islam, was a means for me to develop a sense of spirituality and self and not a fundamental belief or moral system. Suzuki describes that spirituality as “the apprehension of the sacred, the holy, the divine.” He says “in our modern world we see matter and spirit as antithetical, but our myths reveal a different understanding. They describe a world permeated with spirit, where matter and spirit are simply different aspects of the totality: together they constitute “being”…These beliefs restore our sense of belonging…” (2007, p. 270). I felt that sense of belonging in Khane as a child.

\(^{59}\) An esoteric understanding of faith (Williams, 1988).

\(^{60}\) One of the “principal features of Ismaili thought” is that while the Imam provides guidance, the process through which the believer comes to understand it and makes meaning (primarily using the intellect) is the essence of “Isma’ili spirituality” and this is “exemplified in their literature and in their concepts of learning and knowledge” (Nanji, 1987, p. 6). I believed as a child and believe today that I have the freedom to make meaning of religious guidance within the context of a spiritual and ethical framework.

\(^{61}\) A growing body of literature reveals the interconnection between spirituality and the natural world without the infusion of traditional theology or religious beliefs. Eco-spirituality, for example, is described as the “intuitive and embodied awareness of all life and…a relational view of person to planet, inner to outer landscape, and soul to soil” (Lincoln, 2000, p. 227). Deep Ecology is defined “as a way of developing a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities, and all of Nature. It can potentially satisfy our deepest yearnings: faith and trust in our most basic intuitions; courage to take direct action; joyous confidence to dance with the sensuous harmonies discovered through spontaneous, playful
experience of “doing Niyaz” and imagining ribbons of incense rise through a space like a magical wand in fairytale allowed me to develop a relationship with the non-human world that was spiritual. Drinking water with deeper intentionality allowed me to sense the water and appreciate its physical, symbolic and spiritual meaning. Grounded my relationship with it. I thought about the opportunity that rituals gave me to develop a greater sense of awareness and express gratitude. I learned that some rituals evolve from historical cultures and oral traditions and, therefore, are essentially subjective.

The subjectivity of spiritual rituals during my childhood enabled me to develop a greater sense of awareness and imagination, the same imagination that I sensed for the non-human world. In practicing rituals as an Ismaili and sometimes as a Hindu I was exposed to religion from a spiritual and ethical framework rather than a paradigm of right from wrong. The sentient experience of rituals spiritually connected my relationship to the natural world and inspired meaning in my life. Rituals, gave me a sense of hope, faith and belief in something greater than myself.

62 “Children in particular tend to intuitively believe in the super natural and to believe that bodies and souls are distinct” (Suzuki, 2007, p. 274).

63 “Rituals are a public affirmation of meaning, value, connection” (Suzuki, 2007, p. 252).

64 Nurani, 2011.
and what I know. I realized the value and significance of rituals (in Khane and otherwise) in formulating my ecological identity and worldview.\(^65\)


“Lock your door,” Mum said as she parked on the driveway of their apartment building. The driveway felt different, unlike the house I grew up in. No grass, trees and gardens. The apartment building catered to single people and older couples. The saturated electronics market in Nairobi forced Mum and Dad to move to a small town in Tanzania, Mwanza but the promise in Mwanza faded and they came back to Nairobi to this cozy one bedroom furnished apartment. As I studied the complex I noticed Mum waiting for me. I stepped out of the Toyota Corola, stretched for the lock, shoved it down and cranked the door. Mum and I sauntered to the stairs and back to the apartment.

\(^65\) “During rituals we have the experience, unique in our culture, of neither opposing nature or trying to be in communion with nature; but of finding ourselves within nature…. [Knowing] will never replace respect in man’s dealings with ecological systems. For the ecological systems in which man participates are likely to be so complex that he may never have sufficient comprehension of their content and structures to permit him to predict the outcome of many of his own acts. Ritual is the focused way in which we both experience and express that respect” (LaChapelle, 1985, p. 250).
CIRCLE THREE: BREATH OF HOPE

Ink pen on watercolor paper and a photograph.
THE MORNING AFTER

I sneak out of my room to brush my teeth. Mum’s black stilettos lie outside my door. I wish it was a weekday. I wish I could go to school and play music and see my friends and be outside. Mum and Dad’s bedroom door is open. I tiptoe over to shut it. My younger brother Ali’s door is closed. Alcohol and sweat hover in the air.

A jigsaw puzzle of broken glass covers the floor in the living room downstairs. The pieces look like they belong to wine glasses from Dad’s bar. There’s no sign of wine. I sweep the floor.

“How was your evening, sweetheart?” Mum’s groggy voice creeps up behind me. Her eyes darkened from smudged mascara.

“Good,” I say.

“What are you making for breakfast?”

“Tea and toast.”

“Can you make me some, please? And can you get me some Panadol too? Please. My head hurts.”

Last night, I lay in bed and stared at the gap under my closed door. Light from the hallway slid into my dark room. A cold draft broke through the window behind me and stroked my hair. A loose curl played on my forehead. It tickled. Heavy rain knocked on the window and filled the room with soft music. I heard a car honk at the gate. Were they home?
Mum and Dad usually went out on Saturday nights. They honked to wake up the Askari, the night guard, at the gate of our Nairobi home.

Minutes later the front door clicked open. I tried not to think. I looked around at the shadows and shapes in the space around me: my square Sony boom box on the desk, my ovalish backpack filled with Year 7 textbooks on the floor, my rectangular poster of New Kids On The Block hanging on the wall. The room felt still.

“Keep it down!” Mum’s voice traveled up the stairs. Dad was home too. I closed my eyes as if to say thank you for getting them both home safely. I wasn’t sure who I was saying “thank you” to. I opened my eyes. I glanced underneath the door again. Was anyone outside? I thought about Ali.

I closed my eyes. This time I tried to fall asleep.

“I am tired of this life. We can’t go on like this,” Mum’s desperate voice cried. I opened my eyes. My heart beat faster. I felt afraid that Mum would walk into my room. What would she say? What would I do?

I closed my eyes tighter. Wrinkles formed between my eyebrows. I listened to the crickets sing in the backyard. I heard frogs also. I felt cold. I wondered how crickets and frogs felt outside in the rain. Were they the same ones from last night? I pulled the blanket up to my nose and left room for my eyes to peak at the door. I waited. Warm air bounced between the My Little Pony blanket and my face. Please let them go to sleep.
I heard the sound of a glass smash on the floor. I jumped out of bed, bolted to the door, and leaned my ear against the rough wood. I listened. Heavy feet thumped up the stairs.

I sprinted back to bed, closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. My eyelids fluttered. I couldn’t pretend. I squinted and spotted a narrow shadow on the other side of the door. Mum stood close to the door. I listened for Dad. Silence.

I watched Mum drag her feet past my door and into her room, beside mine. The water flushed in the toilet, the rain grew steady outside, and the ray of light underneath my door vanished. Where was Dad?

I listened to the frogs and the crickets and the gentle sound of the rain. I fell asleep.

As I serve Mum a cup of tea, two slices of toast and three extra-strength Panadols, Dad rolls down the stairs in his white bathrobe. Stale air from the room follows. Dad drops beside Mum at the dining table, reaches for the morning newspaper and says, “Nisha, can you make me a cup of coffee?”
MAKING SENSE

Aish and I arrived in Nairobi twelve days ago. I leave for President’s Awards later today. I can’t wait. So far we have hung out at home with Mum and Dad, filtered through old photographs, certificates and reports, dropped by the new hot spot in Nairobi, Westgate Mall, and savored fresh, home-cooked meals.

*  

Last night we went out to eat at a new Japanese restaurant, Zen Garden. The ambience of Zen Garden reminded me of the restaurants that line Yorkville Avenue in Toronto; dim lighting, modern furniture and kitsch oriental artifacts. Large statues of Buddha, fans with hand painted scripture, fake bamboo sticks and ceramic Bonsai pots. The waiter, a young black man about five foot-seven inches with broad shoulders and no facial hair, approached our round table. He wore a white shirt, black pants and a red sash around his waist. He greeted us and laid down a spread of menus on the utensils in front of me.

“What can I get you to drink this evening?” he looked at Mum.

“I’ll have a double scotch with water please,” she responded. I felt a jolt in my stomach.

“Sure, madam. What about you, sir?” he turned to Dad.

“I’ll have a cold Stella.”

“And you?” My turn.


“I’ll have a Coke no ice, please,” Aish said.
As the waiter walked away I noticed his red sash tied into a bow on his lower back. I panned the room for the female version of the outfit but did not see a waitress at Zen Garden.

“What do you feel like eating?” Mum asked as she picked up a menu.

“It doesn’t matter. Whatever you guys want to try,” I responded.

We got into a conversation about what to order and finally decided on an Asian feast of spring rolls, sushi, shrimp curry, chicken noodles and vegetable-fried rice. Mum drank a couple rounds of scotch. Dad had a few more exotic beers. We paid for the meal, grabbed the plastic bag of leftovers and walked to Mum’s Toyota Corola.

The breeze outside Zen Garden felt cold and damp. Mum slid into the driver’s seat. Dad curled around to the other side. Aish and I exchanged glances and slipped into the back seats.

“Where are we going?” I heard Dad mumble.

“I don’t know,” Mum snapped. Aish rested his palm on my hand. We drove past an open drug store, a Casino and Maua Close. The way home. Aish tightened his fingers around my hand. I noticed an old homeless woman sitting at the corner of the intersection under a street lamp. She hugged her knees. The glow from the street lamp exposed her wrinkled face, dirty hands and torn clothes. The light turned red and Mum stopped. Mum opened her window just enough to jam the plastic bag through. The old woman ran to the car and pulled the bag of leftovers out the other side. Mum whisked the handle on her door to reel up the window. Mum always looked for something to give people on the street. Sometimes she bought ten loaves
of bread and ten pints of milk and drove to neighborhoods where she knew a group of homeless young boys idled.  

“Asante sana Mama, asante... ” the woman’s voice faded as she hopped off the road and sunk back into place on the side of Mpaka Road. I watched her rip the bag and reach in for dinner with her hands. Minutes later Mum’s Toyota Corola pulled into the parking lot at Gypsies, a popular Nairobi bar.

A few hours later, around midnight, I heard the thrust of thunder outside. Just then, Mum and Dad stood up and cued to leave. In a hurry to get home I led the way.

Aish waited for Mum and Dad to follow and hovered behind. We took our spots in the car. As the car began to move I felt another jolt in my stomach. The wipers on the front windshield ricocheted back and forth in high speed but the view still looked blurry. Aish edged closer to the middle of the back seat and stared ahead. The windows fogged over and Dad spun the knob on the dashboard to turn on the heater.

I shivered. We were driving back on Mpaka Road when the car swerved off the road and jerked back on. Aish nabbed my thigh. I latched onto the back of Dad’s seat.

“Sorry,” Mum said hunched over the steering wheel. The car rattled and puddles of water exploded on the sidewalk as we drove by. I prayed.

66 In unfolding ecological identity Thomashow found that “although parents’ ideological predispositions have some influence on their children, other factors, such as attitudes towards community service, respect for other peoples’ opinions, standing up for ones’ values, and open mindedness are the critical role-model influences on political identity” (1995, p. 113). Homelessness is a complex problem in any developing country and we never spent a day in Nairobi without crossing paths with a homeless woman, man or child. I learned that her compassion and generosity became a part of my worldview and that I shared the same empathy for people, as well as for the non-human world.
Mum would say “Sorry” every time she woke me up in the middle of the night. She did not always come into my room, only on some Saturdays. I think I was ten when she started barging in – around the time that I hit puberty and began to menstruate. Mum began to include me in their fights. Maybe I was old enough, or mature enough, to understand and to talk to Dad without any risk of retaliation. I became Mum's defense.

Mum and Dad would come home from a party or bar and get into a fight about something. Some guy looked at Mum, or she snapped at Dad for saying something, or not saying something. They blamed each other all the time. She never went into Ali’s room. Ali never came out. They would yell at each other for a while and then Dad would stop talking. Mum would open my door and say, “Talk to your Dad.” I would talk to Mum and sometimes to Dad and convinced them to go to sleep. In the morning it all went away.

The car shook as we pulled into the driveway at home. We made it. I stormed into my room, changed, and lay in bed waiting for Aish. I thought about the rainy nights when I was seven, eight, nine and ten years of age. Tears swelled up in my eyes and streamed down my face. I remembered listening and talking to the frogs and crickets playing in the backyard at our old house. Frogs and crickets that filled my room with music as a child were my childhood friends. At a time when I felt afraid, helpless and lonely, the sound of croaking frogs and chirping crickets carried peace
and hope. I imagined the draft from the window caressing my hair. I always felt like a breath of hope had circled through my body at the end of those nights. I realized how the frogs and crickets, the rain and wind, the smells and sounds had helped me get through it all. Had helped me “survive.” I believed that they were from another world. That someone, something, somewhere took care of them in the rain, took care of Mum and Dad, and will take care of me.

In trying to understanding how my experience and sensual awareness of those nights as a little girl allowed me to “survive” and informed my ecological identity, I realized that the mystery of the experience of frogs or crickets supported my connection to the natural world beyond the spiritual realm already described.

67 Ancient societies “emerged from and were completely bound up in the matrix of life-forms that shared our surroundings. They were more than just our genetic kin and potential prey, they were our companions, sharing the clear night skies and constantly announcing their presence with their calls” (Suzuki, 2007, p. 255). In his book, *The Human Bond with Other Species*, Edward Wilson describes this connection as *Biophilia*, “the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” that lead to “emotional affiliation of human beings to other living things…” (Suzuki, 2007, p. 256).

68 Dr. J. Gary Knowles (Personal communication, September 17, 2008) said “a robust ecological identity (grounded in place, family and spirituality for instance) is likely to foster a sense of being and accomplishment in the world as well as foster one’s survival.” I found that my ecological identity helped me as a child and continues to help me “survive.” It allowed me to maintain emotional balance in my social interactions (in school, with family and friends), lean on my sense of spirituality and build resiliency as a child.

69 “As humans, we are well acquainted with the needs and capacities of the human body – we live our own bodies and so know, from within, the possibilities of our form. We cannot know, with the same familiarity and intimacy, the lived experience of a grass snake or snapping turtle; we cannot readily experience the precise sensations of a hummingbird sipping nectar from a flower or a rubber tree soaking up sunlight. And yet we do know how it feels to sip from a fresh pool of water or bask and stretch in the sun. Our experience may indeed be a variant of these other modes of sensitivity; nevertheless, we cannot, as humans, precisely experience the living sensations of another form” (Abram, 1996, p. 13-14).
Wondering what it was like to be a frog for instances and never being able to know, created room for imagination that fostered hope and therefore a means for survival.

This awareness inspires a reciprocal responsibility in my ecological identity, a responsibility to fight for the survival of all species.\(^7\)

Aish jarred the door. I pulled the blanket up to my face and swept my tears.

“Are you ok?” he asked.

“Yeah, just tired.”

“Me too,” he said as he snuck into bed beside me.

This morning, my eyes swell up from crying at night. I pack my backpack for the next five days of hiking.

Two t-shirts.

Five underwear.

Toothbrush and toothpaste.

Three pairs of socks.

Fleece jacket.

Sleeping Bag.

Sandals.

Hair ties.

Stainless steel water bottle.

Bag of Almonds.

Pen.

Brown Leather Journal.

\(^7\) “Islam does not deal in dichotomies but in all encompassing unity. Spirit and body are one, man and nature are one. What is more, man is answerable to God for what man has created” (Aga Khan, 1979, p. 1).
Ink pen on watercolor paper and a photograph.
FRIDAY AFTERNOON

I looked at the clock on the back wall of the classroom. 3:45 pm. Fridays always go slowly. Miss Boucher squeezed the chalk with her skinny fingers, sunk her face into the blackboard and told us about African geography. Her voice high pitched and squeaky. Natasha, the oldest girl in the class, sat in front of me, hovered over her chair and imitated Miss Boucher’s perfectly hunched back. I ignored them both. I gazed out the window. It overlooked the farmland behind Green Acres Girls Boarding School. The tea plantations around Green Acres glowed. I remembered the layer of fog that iced the hills in the morning. I yawned.

Margaret, the matron in the dorms, howled through our dorm at 5:30 am. The sun still moseyed behind the darkness and the stars lurked in the sky. I slept on the bottom bed of the corner bunk bed in the dorm. Closest to the washroom. I remembered the frigid shower and silent wobble to the cafeteria for orange juice and toast at 6:00 am. My stomach grumbled. In the evenings I did my homework and scurried away to explore the fields.71 I snuck out to the cross-country trail behind the dorm and sat by the big tree at the edge of the river, careful not to dirty my green skirt. I watched the water flow and listened to the small waves crash into the riverbanks and rocks. On clear days I saw reflections of birds twirling on the river.

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71 “The childhood landscape is learned on foot, and a map is inscribed in the mind – trails and pathways and groves – the mean dog, the cranky old man’s house, the pasture with a bull in it- out wider and farther. All of us carry with us a picture of the terrain that was learned roughly between the ages of six and nine. You can almost totally recall the place you walked, played, biked, swam” (Snyder, 1990, pp. 26-27).
caught a whiff of horse poo on the ground or steam from a simmering stew in a
nearby hut or moss that coated the trees in forest a few yards away.\textsuperscript{72}

I envied the Year Twelve girls standing around outside the classroom window.

Why can’t we be let out early?

“Ding! Dong! Ding! Dong!” 4:00 pm. Time to go home. Margaret, marched
across the courtyard, scanned the classrooms and swung the bell beside her large
womanly hips.

I threw my sharpened pencils and Karatasi Brand notebook in the desk,
slammed it shut, and raced to the dorm. The dorm is on the other side of the school,
past the cafeteria, soccer field, and snack shop where you could buy treats.

I stumbled at the dorm door. I tripped over the metal doormat, gasped for air
and pushed through. Mariam, Angela and Betty packed their things for the weekend.

They beat me there. I pretended not to notice.

I stared ahead at my bed and paced through the catwalk between the small
metal beds. Why did I get the last bed? The beds lined up like cars parked on both
sides of a narrow island. Ten on each side, dressed in a flat white pillow, a faded
green sheet and a charcoal grey wool blanket.

Short individual metal lockers sat beside each bed, sealed with padlocks like a
trunk of treasure. Protected from the eight-year old princesses that lived there. I tore
open my locker, pulled out my ragged backpack and stuffed it with clothes. A white

\textsuperscript{72} “Sense of place is the domestic basis of environmentalism; it’s the foundation of our
deepest connection to the natural world…. It is about habits of familiarity, the places we
visit everyday, how our immediate environment influences the way we think, breathe, and
eat; the way the spirit of the land permeates our lives” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 194).
shirt, a pair of white socks, a green skirt, and four purple underwear. Mum always asked me to bring home my clothes. She did not trust that I washed them properly at school.

4:15 pm. Mum and Dad would be there soon. I flung my bag onto my shoulders and headed to the parking lot to wait.

I searched the parking lot but no one was there. I dropped my bag, plopped on the ground and crossed my legs. My purple underwear peaked through.


The sun fell behind the tall trees at the gate. Cars drove in and out of the pick up zone. Angela and Betty locked hands and skipped toward a woman waiting near a white Toyota Land Rover. Could that be their Mum? They hugged. I watched them drive away. Moments later Mariam strolled towards me.

“Do you know who is picking you up?” she asked. I shrugged my shoulders as if I did not care.

“I think my Dad is coming today,” she continued. I stabbed my elbow in my thigh, rested my face on my palm and pushed my cheeks up. I glanced around again. The parking lot was empty.

A navy blue BMW rolled up in front of us. Mariam jumped up and yelled “Daddy!” He stayed in the car and waved her in. I looked around. Just me.

Mr. Kiyimba, the principal, lived beside the parking lot at Green Acres. I popped up and wandered toward his huge backyard to visit his horses. I smelled the
horse poo and remembered seeing them earlier on in the week. Mr. Kiyimba didn’t 

mind. My favorite one was brown. He had a long bushy tail like my ponytail, only 
bigger. His coat was shiny. He spent most of his time leaning over the fence, people 

watching.

“Still waiting Nisha?” I recognized Miss Boucher’s squeaky voice.

“Yes, Miss Boucher,” I answered politely. “I am sure they will be here soon.”

“Do you want me to check at the office, in case they called?”

Embarrassed, I say “no, that’s ok. I will wait for a little longer and then check.

Thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Miss Boucher. ” Thankfully she walked away.

5:00 pm, 5:15 pm, what time is it? Am I going to stay in school for the weekend?

I gripped the straps on my shoulders, kicked the pebbles on the ground and 

wandered back to the office to see if Mum or Dad called.

Steps away from the office I saw Mum stomping toward me.

“Hi Mum!” I celebrated.

“Where were you?” she questioned. Dad’s empty Land Cruiser hid behind her.
MAKING SENSE

I slice a leaf under her body and fight the rocky earth. The leaf cracks. Two little legs surrender to the sky. I wonder how long she lay there in the middle of the path, how many people passed by, how many flies sucked the blood on her wing. I grab another leaf. Tender yellow veins burst across the big green leaf. It feels strong. I try again. I saw through the dry soil on the other side. Up, down, up, down, up, down. The leaf pushes through and shatters the dry soil. Half way under her body I hit a rock. I drop the leaf.

I crouch and flick soil onto her right wing with the tip of my fingers. I bury the blood. Dirt gets trapped under my nails. I tremble. I close my eyes and pray. I tuck the inside edge of my palms and pinky fingers on either side of her body and shuffle my way under. She rests in my hands. I let her rest. She feels light. Lighter than I expected. She feels warm. I blame the raging sun. Her brown feathers feel soft but her legs stand firm like toothpicks jabbed into a layered sandwich.

I stand, careful not to shake my hands and search for a safe place. A bushy tree basks at the edge of the path. I travel toward it. I squat in front of the tree and stretch my arms between, past and under the branches. The muscles in my legs tighten and burn, the shade from the tree cools my arm. Twigs, thorns and leaves get caught on my shirt and scratch my hand. Sweat glistens on my forehead. I turn away to shield my eyes from the branches and feel the tree poke my cheek. My middle finger stabs the trunk. I release.
I spring up. Blood from my chest plummets to my feet. My legs feel wobbly. I scour my hands on my filthy pants, step back from the tree, and peer through the branches. I see her. She sleeps at the core of the tree, her bleeding wing up against the trunk. I turn around. Otieno waits for me at the top of the hill.

“Five more kilometers,” Otieno promises, “are you okay Nisha?”

“Yeah, I am good,” I lie. I can barely feel my legs. We keep moving. The musty smell of overnight campfires layers my skin, clothes and hair. Dirt from three days of hiking builds between the creases in my ears and the back of my neck. I enjoy the silence and keep walking.73

An hour later we approach the abandoned school where we planned to stay the night. I unload my backpack away from the building and fall to the ground. I unravel the laces on my filthy hiking shoes and watch the caked on mud chip, crack and tumble back to the earth. I pull my feet out and stretch my toes. My calves hurt. An evening gust shoots through my pants and chills my body. A knitted pattern from my damp socks tattoos my feet. I relax my bare feet on the grass. I sense the coarse twigs, pebbles and sand on the bottom of my feet.74 I remember the bird.

I stretch on a pair of dry dirty socks and slide into my sandals. I did it. I finished my second gold President’s Award expedition. I inhale and release as if a doctor

73 “Walking is the great adventure, the first meditation, a practice of heartiness and soul primary to humankind. Walking is the exact balance of spirit and humility” (Snyder, 1990, p. 19).

74 “Sense-of place meditation...a series of observations that allow them to focus on their senses in relation to the landscape” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 15).
stood behind me listening to the air that fills and drains my lungs. Clouds spill over the hills ahead of me and darken the unwinding villages.

Later on at night the kids cuddle in their sleeping bags, sip hot chocolate, and circle their last blazing campfire. I awaken my leather journal from the bottom of my backpack and huddle around them. We listen to the wood burn and collapse into white ash. Splinters explode in blue flames and pop up in the dark. Stillness fills the spaces between us.

I remember campfires in Naivasha. I would sit on a rock at the brink of the fire pit and tease the wood with a twig for hours. Sometimes, the twig would light up and I would smother it in the sand. My shins, arms and cheeks would roast while the back of my neck, spine and shoulders froze.

“We’ll leave for Nairobi at dawn tomorrow. Make sure you get some rest tonight and be ready to go early in the morning,” Otieno scares the kids.

Two more days in Nairobi. I think about my journey so far. Green Acres was now Tumaini High School. Tumaini, “Kiswahili for hope,” quoted an article in the February 11th 2009 Daily Nation, replaced the girls’ boarding school and planned to re-open for Kikuyu kids. I called them and never heard back.
Baking at the fire, I think about my time at Green Acres.\textsuperscript{77} I wonder if horses still lazed around Mr. Kiyimba’s house. I remember my bed with the itchy wool blanket and the tuck shop where I spent my pocket money from the weekend to buy crisps and dairy milk chocolate and the cafeteria where we ate breakfast, lunch and dinner and the classroom with my desk that opened up and stored my pencils and notebooks. I remember the plantation hills and cross-country trails. I remember the roughness of the tree by the river. The cold morning showers and Friday afternoons.

Njoroge creeps up beside me and shares the warmth from the fire.

“So, how do you feel?” he whispers.

“I don’t know. Good I guess.”

“What do you mean? You just finished your second gold expedition. I don’t know many people that come back to do another gold.” I laugh.

How do I feel?

I feel grateful for being able to hike with the kids from Premier Academy. I feel blessed to walk through the Aberdares where the air, plantations and hills took me back to a childhood place and reminded me of Green Acres. I try to make sense of the serendipitous nature of events that did not allow me to physically visit Green Acres. I feel sad. I feel content.

\textsuperscript{77} “By returning to these (childhood) place based experiences, adults are able to let years of distracting events fall away as they are drawn to moments of re-enactment held in the landscape of childhood as if they are looking through a prism. The intensity of the place-based experience increases the frequency with which the adult returns to the memory and repeats it in her mind or in her creative endeavors” (Sbrocchi, 2007, p. 201).
I reflect on my sense of place. What is sense of place? Place like somewhere to go, like the bus stop on the corner of two familiar roads, like a park with a bench and a slide and a swing, like a campfire. Place feels like it has a name, an address, a location on a map. Does it? If place is a geographical physical space, what is sense of place? The way I feel in and about a place? The way I relate to it? The way it relates to me?

I think about places from the middle years of my childhood. My childhood home off 6th Parklands Road, Green Acres in Limuru, and Khane in Pangani. I picture details on memory maps. The garden, gate, bedrooms and servants quarters claim a spot on the map of my childhood home. The dorm, cafeteria, washroom, cross-country trail, tree, horse and river spread on the map of Green Acres. The Niyaz line, a podium, shoe rack and courtyard settle on the map of Khane. But what is my sense of place in my childhood home, at Green Acres and in Khane?

I unravel qualities of these places that gave me a sense of place in my childhood. Each place had a purpose. A home, a temporary home and school, a place for reflection and spiritual practice. Each place balanced human interaction with elements of the natural world. A housing complex surrounded with gardens, an

78 “Sense of place concerns our home and region, feelings about land and community kindred species, community niches, and sacred places” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 194).

79 “Children start out learning place by learning those little realms around the house, the settlement, and outward” (Snyder, 1990, p. 29).
institution built beside farmland, trails and wilderness, a sanctuary of natural character and space for simple rituals with natural elements.

Most of all, each place offered time for my child mind to wonder, to explore, to be free. The combination of purpose, interconnection with the natural world, and freedom of time inspired my childhood sense of place.

Upon returning to Nairobi to revisit my childhood places I learned that places change and will change again. Change is the essence of life and a consequence of human existence on earth. A stretch of deserted land off 6th Parklands Road is now a shopping mall, Green Acres is now Tumaini and carpets replaced the straw mat on Khanes floors.

Place is temporary and I believe that sense of place is defined by experience and awareness of the physical elements of place. A place may have a name, an address and be marked on a map, but I learned that sense of place embodies my physical relationship with any space, at any time. My sense of place is my sensory awareness and experience of a place.

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80 “A wilderness, in contrast to those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Devall, 1985, p. 115).

81 “Spaciousness is closely associated with sense of being free…. The physical vital – children and athletes – enjoy a sense of special expansiveness little known to office bound workers, who listen to tales of physical prowess with a mixture of admiration and envy” (Tuan, 1977, p. 52).

82 “Experiences of place are not fixed; they are multi-dimensional and enter the mind, body and heart through waters imbibed, dirt under nails, smells pressed into memories and images inextricably linked to imagination” (Abraham, 1996, p. 204).
When time paused at the campfire I realized that the simplicity of childhood experiences during the evenings and weekends at home, at a rural girls boarding school and within the walls of a prayer hall fostered the freedom to explore the non-human world and build a physical relationship with the natural world.

I realized simplicity is a value, an intention and a choice. It is being open to experiencing a place\(^\text{85}\) in a fundamentally physical way, through touch, sound, taste, smell and sight. I feel a sense of place staring at the fire, resting my bare feet on the ground, and picking up the dead bird on the trail. Sense of place asks me to pause, to reflect and restore awareness.\(^\text{86}\) My sense of place is engrained in my ecological identity and how I physically relate to the natural world.

One after the other the kids faded and the fire sizzled louder. I dug into the cracks in the burning wood with a stick and spun the logs.

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\(^\text{83}\) “Our place is part of who we are. Yet even “place” has a kind of fluidity; it passes through space and time” (Snyder, 1999, p.26).

“If time is conceived as flow or movement then place is a pause. Just as time may be represented by an arrow, a circular orbit, or the path of a swinging pendulum, so may movements in space; and each representation has its characteristic sets of pauses or places” (Tuan, 1977, p. 198).

\(^\text{84}\) “Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (Snyder, 1990, p. 42).

\(^\text{85}\) “Place is a special kind of object. It is a concentration of value, though not a valued thing, that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell” (Tuan, 1977, p. 12).

\(^\text{86}\) “Place becomes more than the external world; it becomes an internal state of being.” (Bailey, 2010, p. 106).
“It's getting late, I should go to sleep,” Njoroge said as he retreated to an empty classroom with the other teachers.

“Good night.”

“Good night, see you tomorrow.”

I wondered if I should find an empty classroom and escape the freezing night.

I strolled to my backpack, unrolled my sleeping bag beside the fire, and curled up until the roosters woke me up in the morning mist.
CIRCLE FIVE: REDISCOVERING HOME

Oil paint on cotton canvas sewed on a straw basket and twigs. 12 x 7 in.
THE GRINDER

Tracy, a dear friend, old colleague and spiritual counselor, and I planned to meet at the Grinder at 5:00 pm. The Grinder, an espresso bar on the corner of Marjory Street and Gerrard Street in the east end of Toronto, is my new “home.” Aish and I recently moved down the street from the Grinder, north of Jones and Gerrard. I go to the Grinder all the time, for a coffee, a Montreal bagel with dill cream cheese, a place to write or just a place to be. I often stay for hours and tune into neighborhood coffee talk. A “Starbucks Coming Soon” sign, down the street, recently headlined the news at the Grinder. With Christmas the day after tomorrow people talked about cheese fondue, turkey stuffing and crowded malls. The owner at the Grinder, a middle-aged Scottish man, greets returning coffee lovers and tells stories on just about anything; great local restaurants, trips to Argentina, Taiwan and Italy, his first and second marriage.

One day, he said, “I am in the garment business.” What does that mean? I never asked. The new Starbucks does not bother him. It bothers me. He hopes it attracts new retailers and small local shops. I do too.

I peer at the microwave in our kitchen and read the digital clock. Fifteen minutes before I meet Tracy. I dash up for a sweater, put on my jacket and check my pockets for mittens. I lock the backdoor and slip out on the narrow laneway toward Jones. Even with the holidays, the neighborhood feels empty and quiet. Dark, old, battered houses.
A black squirrel scampers across the laneway and hustles up a tree. I follow it up, under and across the dry branches. Salmon clouds idle in the sky. The aging sunlight bounces off the lampposts on the street. I walk down Jones, turn on Gerrard and hop into the Grinder minutes before 5:00 pm. Fresh brewing coffee, a grand red chandelier and steam from the coffee machine warms the space.

“Hey, Nisha!” Sarah, the barista waves me in. “The usual?” she asks.

“Yes please. Thanks Sarah.” I claim the only couch at the Grinder, pick up my small Americano and wait for Tracy. A few minutes later I see Tracy outside the large bay window. She digs through her bag, grips her travel mug and then scrambles into the Grinder.

“I had to get my mug before I came to see you,” she says as we hug.

I chuckle. I had not seen Tracy since I got back from Nairobi a few months ago. It feels great to see her. Tracy walks over to Sarah, replenishes her mug and plops across from me. We pause.

“So, how are you doing?” I start.

“I am good. Busy as usual. How are you? How’s the new house?”

“It’s good. It’s been crazy trying to get settled in over the holidays, and we’re still getting used to the new neighborhood,” I complain.

“I know, it takes a while before it feels like home,” Tracy says.

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A hand painted wooden plaque hung in the kitchen of our Nairobi home. It trapped a bird (a rooster, I think), vines, red flowers and a blessing for the home. I
wondered what makes a place home. A common space, shared warm meals, sentimental pictures and objects that store meaning? A sense of comfort, security and belonging?

Aish and I lived in our condominium (our previous home) by Lake Ontario in Toronto for three years. I attended the annual general meetings, participated on the Greening and Energy Committee, and volunteered at the local community center. Our neighbors on the east side of the hallway walked past us every time we saw them. The unit on the west side housed new tenants every year. I hated not having a backyard but loved staring out at the lake. I hated the quiet elevator ride but loved the friendly doorman. I hated the garbage that drifted to the docks but loved the rush of tourists that flocked in the summer. We moved from the harbourfront to escape the rising condominium maintenance costs and craved more space in a house. The house felt big for two; stairs, a gate out the backyard and our own driveway. No wooden plaque or blessing on the wall.

I remember coming back from Nairobi, my childhood home, and landing at Pearson Airport in Toronto. I tucked my air-conditioned feet under Aish’s thighs and waited for the seat belt sign to turn off. Lit-up glass buildings and florescent jackets brightened the midnight airport and trumped the stars. The haze of airport traffic burned my tired eyes. I surfed through my journal and wondered if I would ever go back to Nairobi. I realized that Nairobi, the blue and white house that captured my childhood memories, the Mama Mboga’s, and Pangani Khane was my childhood home, not my home. What was home?
A man rattles the door and stumbles into the Grinder. Snowflakes powder his thick grey moustache. He rubs his hands and scuffs his coat at the door.

“It’s a cold day out there Rob!” Sarah yells across the room.

“Oh, just another day. Just another day,” his voice softens.

“Come on in and grab a coffee,” she welcomes him in.

Tracy turns and smiles. I admire the snow that brushes the window and dusts the sidewalk. We both note the smell of urine that lifts off his stained pants.

“So, how was it?” Tracy asks.

“It was great. I can’t describe it.”

“I can imagine. Do you feel like you got what you needed?”

“I think so, I am still looking through stuff and trying to figure it all out, but you know…” I confess. Tracy nods and I feel calm.

“Stay warm,” Sarah tells the man as he walks out.

“You have a good evening ladies,” he leaves the Grinder and waddles into the darkness.

Buying a new house felt permanent, like marriage, having a surgery or getting a tattoo. I realized that I am now from Toronto and our new house is symbolic of my new home, the kind of home that I had in Nairobi. The home with common space, shared warm meals, sentimental pictures and objects that stored meaning.
But I discovered that the only place\(^\text{87}\) that gives me a sense of comfort, security and belonging is my relationship with nature.\(^\text{88}\) As a little girl, I felt at home when I played in the garden, when I wandered through cross-country trails and sat by the river, when I hiked up the hills and burned by the fireplace. I feel at home when I am aware of my senses and my relationship with the natural world.

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Snowflakes continue to swirl above the lights, under the street signs and in front of the cars that gale through Gerrard. I cradle my mug and slurp my warm, watered down espresso. A man’s voice streams on the radio at the Grinder and interrupts Bob Marley’s No Woman No Cry. He warns us of an overnight storm. A petite Asian woman comes out of the Private Hair Salon on the other side of the street and drags in to the salon a “two for one” street sign.

“You should probably head home soon,” I worry.

“Yeah, I’ll leave in about fifteen,” Tracy insists.

Sarah loads the dishwasher, tucks in the chairs at the rest of the tables and mops the ceramic floors around us.

“So, what did you find out?” Tracy inquires.

“About?”

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\(^{87}\) “Place is an individual and socially constructed reality – a notion that interviews the elements of geographical location, social consciousness and the meanings derived from experience in-place (Knowles & Thomas, 2001, p 210).”

\(^{88}\) “The happiness of inner peace is difficult to attain. It takes guidance and support. Most environmentalists find this happiness when they participate in nature, when they feel integrated with their environment, when they are filled with gratitude and wonder” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 168).
“About your childhood experiences and how you think about the environment?” she laughs.

“I don’t know.” I place my mug on the table. “There’s a few things that keep jumping out at me but I still have to make sense of it.”

I told my story through “circles of awareness.” Each circle connected to the next, each circle unsure about where it begins and where it ends, each circle whole and fluid, holding a part of my ecological identity. My relationship with the environment (my home), my ecological identity is interlaced with an awareness of who I am, my spiritual understanding of my purpose on earth, my emotional dependence on the non-human world and the physical gift of the senses. My “circles of awareness.”

These “circles of awareness” are woven in my values and ethical framework. They convey strands of my identity. Revisiting my childhood experiences illuminated the context of my childhood. I restored a deeper sense of respect and responsibility for the non-human world. I learned that my sensory experience fused with my values defines who I am.

Practicing rituals with a sense of intention and reflection, interacting with the non-human world with wonder, humility, and integrity created space for me to

[^89]: “How can I know what the nonhuman realm is truly like? The first answer is that I can watch: Observe, reflect, make inferences and theories, test those theories, and continue watching. Part of that translates into something like respect. The second answer is, considering the first answer, that we know nature, and come to know it better, by knowing ourselves. This is a trick answer, perhaps. It is circular, in a way. But it warrants a simpler question; Who are we? Or put another way, what is our identity?” (Kett, 2009, p. 7).
develop a sense of hope and a sense of place. I learned that the choices I make within my evolving context speak to my privilege and responsibility. My journey to unfold the relationship between my childhood experiences and ecological identity bridged the Zahir and Batin\(^{90}\) and brought meaning to my life.

- Tracy tosses her bag on her shoulder and gives me a squeeze.

  “I can’t wait to read it,” she says as she leaves the Grinder and gets on the westbound streetcar. I stick around for a little longer to write in my journal.

  “You okay dear?” Sarah checks in.

  “I am fine thanks. What time do you guys close today?”

  “Oh, I don’t know, maybe in a little bit.”

  “Okay, let…” Karen and Isabella come through the door and distract Sarah. I met Karen, Isabella’s single mother, a few days ago. She smiles. I smile back. Isabella rushes behind the counter and springs onto Sarah’s black skirt.

  “Hi Sarah! Where’s Dave?” Isabella’s little girl voice fills the room.

  “Hi, Bella. How was school today?” Sarah squats in front of Isabella and clasps her hands.

  “It was fun.”

  “Fun? What did you do?”

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\(^{90}\) “The zahir which defines the world of matter in the arena in which context for spiritual life is shaped. The essence of Isma’ili thought shows no propensity for rejecting this material world; in fact, without action in it, the spiritual quest is regarded unworthy. It is in this juxtaposition of zahir and batin, of material and spiritual, that the world of a believer comes to be invested with full meaning” (Nanji, 1987, p.17).
“What’s that?” Isabella looks up and points to the coffee grinder on the counter.

“It makes coffee,” Sarah explains.

“What’s coffee?”

I stare at the blank page in my journal and draw circles. Small circles, big circles, medium circles, overlapping circles, empty circles.

I stop. I watch Isabella.

I return to the purpose of this work, to thinking about what my story has to do with you, the reader. I confess my intentions for this work are layered. They are personal, political, and academic but I seek to share my story because I am compelled by a story beyond mine. The story of how we know and make meaning as human beings. The story about our purpose on earth and our relationship to what gives us life. My story developed from reflecting on childhood experiences in the natural world but I acknowledge that reflection may or may not sustain awareness, and awareness may or may not become action. Yet I tell the story of a little girl, I tell the story of sentient experiences, to create space for you to make sense on your own story. Does that make sense? To offer a place for you to reflect on your own experiences, both physical and emotional, of freedom, curiosity and awe during a

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91 “As reader, you have created meaning from the specificity of your own life. I don’t want to collapse the multi-layered meanings you have created, to claim the authority of having created work, and now state firmly, ‘This is what this story means’…” (Brown, 2000, p. 243).
space and time (a place) less distracted by the mechanics of life today, a time of innocence and hope. Childhood.

Uncovering the relationship between childhood experiences and ecological identity could serve to restore awareness of individual values and the connection of human to non-human life, to our collective home. It could inspire action to protect the survival\(^{92}\) of species, including our own, and respect the need for a sustainable future. Awareness of ecological identity could facilitate more deliberate and meaningful experiences in and with the natural world for the future generation of children.\(^{93}\) As such it could inspire a tradition of values that are grounded in environmental responsibility, humility and respect.\(^{94}\) Inspiring “circles of awareness.”

I tell my story with every little girl in mind.

Karen holds the door open as Isabella locks a fresh chocolate cup cake between her tiny hands and licks the icing smothered on top.

“Watch where you’re going Bella,” Sarah warns her.

“Say ‘Thank you’ Isabella,” Karen rolls her eyes.


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\(^{92}\) “The environmental agenda is more than a function of aesthetic and spiritual inclination, it is fundamental to human survival” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 53).

\(^{93}\) In quoting Montagu, Suzuki says that “the Child is the forerunner of humanity – forerunner in the sense that the child is the possessor of all those traits that, when healthily developed, lead to a healthy and fulfilled human being and this to a healthy and fulfilled humanity. (Suzuki, 2007, p. 238).”

\(^{94}\) My return home to the various communities I live in, is through sharing this artful telling story created with words and images. My question now, is whether the communities I live within can hold this story with me and be affected by it” (Brown, 2000, p. 227).
Moments later I notice Sarah counting the day’s earnings at the cash register. Part of her daily shut down routine. I wrap up my brown leather journal, zip up my jacket and slide in the last stray chairs.

“Heading home, Nisha?”

“Yeah, I need to do some more work.”

“I know the feeling. So what’s next? Do you want to become a teacher?”

“No, not really. I am not sure what I want to do.”

Being present in this work as a participant and a researcher, I realized that my ecological identity inspires me to do the right thing. It is the seed that sprouts my environmental consciousness and actions. It is what reminds me of home, and my connection to the earth. I express my gratitude for the blessing of this work and wonder about circles still to form.

Discovering the spiritual grounding of my ecological identity, and identity as a whole inspires me to dig deeper on the environmental action of the Ismaili community. In attending Khane and participating in collective spiritual ceremonies and oral traditions, I sometimes find conflict in what is said and what is done. I seek

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95 “…Doing of the right thing or good is what imparts meaning to existence…. In this way, ethical action provides a sense of identity” (Lange, 2004, p. 16).

96 “Nature is not a place to visit, it is a home – and within that home territory there are more familiar and less familiar places” (Snyder, 1990, p. 7).

97 “Ecological Identity work: using direct experience with nature as a framework for personal decisions, professional choices, political action and spiritual inquiry” (Thomashow, 1995, p. xiii). “Ecological Identity work is a way of saying grace” (p. 205).
to uncover more on the relationship between humans and the non-human world within Ismailism and the broader Muslim Ummah.

I continue to be empowered by the subjective interpretation of rituals in Ismailism and want to learn about the relationship between evolving rituals and their role in impacting the Ismaili understanding of human purpose on earth. I strive to complement the body of knowledge on deep ecology and eco-spirituality.

Although Circle Three, Breath of Hope grew from a “researchable moment,” my emotional relationship with the natural world built my resiliency as a child. I seek to explore the capacity of ecological identity in developing resiliency, in healing and becoming a source of “survival” for children that are exposed to traumatic childhood experiences.

Sarah locks up the Grinder as we part to head home for the night. Dirt from the road sprays the sidewalks and speckles the canvas of white snow. I trample over the snow banks, curl my fingers in my mitts and feel the fog escape from my chapped lips. A stale scent of coffee floats around me. I decide to climb up Jones, pass the entrance to the laneway and go home through the front door.

The street feels just as empty and quiet as the laneway. A few Christmas lights, closed metal blinds and chunky blue, grey, and green City of Toronto garbage bins. No shoveled sidewalks or brushed off cars. I dangle my load of keys as I get closer to our house and listen.
I learned that, while traveling back into my childhood was imperative for this inquiry, my senses transcend space and time (place). Simplicity and awareness of silence is not bound to a rural boarding school. I notice the pigeons that fight for a spot on the sidewalk when I walk to St. Lawrence Market and the snowflakes that touch my face when I walk home. My gift of the senses allows me to live more fluidly with what sustains me and experience the non-human world.\(^98\) I don't know the names of the birds that soar over Lake Ontario or the stubby tree that grows in my backyard. I want to learn. I work to find meaning in my life through my ecological identity\(^99\) and I know my ecological identity makes me feel like a part of the whole.\(^100\) Like I belong.

\(^98\) “Ecological Identity perennially revolves around this path; cultivating sensory awareness, locating wild in everyday experience, using nature as a classroom for the lessons of life...To allow that wildness to reign supreme, one must be free enough to indulge in the exquisite purity of the sense” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 30-32).

\(^99\) “Our ideas are seeds, our language a species, our practice a flower. Let us find niches of responsibility, places of action, and spaces of meaning. Let us walk through our bioregions knowing that each step is significant and every breath a gift” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 205).

\(^100\) “The breathing, sensing body draws it’s sustenance and it’s very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, composing earth, to the nourishment on insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends” (Abram, 1996, pp. 46-47).
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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this work is embedded in qualitative research, a life history approach with underpinnings of arts-informed and reflexive inquiry. I wanted to illuminate the relationship between my childhood experiences and ecological identity. A life history approach presented the opportunity for me to choose my life as the focus of the research and participate in a meaningful research project. In revisiting my childhood experiences I looked into particular elements of childhood experiences and followed the principles of a life history methodology to better understand a general relationship between childhood experiences and ecological identity within environmental education. I share my story through “my circles of awareness” and create space for the reader to make sense of their own ecological identity.

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101 “Life history research across disciplines is based on the fundamental assumption about relationship of the general to the particular, and that the general can be best understood through the analysis of a particular” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 13).

102 “…The arts offers researchers more than a cave wall as it evokes the imagination and the senses through synaesthesia- a crossing of the senses…Arts informed research can challenge epistemological and ecological inequities because art is understood as a way of knowing (Young, 2004, p. 164).”

103 “Reflexive practice comes about by melding the two kinds of theory and processes of theory generation, that is, by considering elements of general theories in the context of one’s own particular theories…. The integration of elements or principles of both kinds of theories is the essence of reflexive or inquiring practice” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 10). “If we accept that the process and product of researching are an expression of the intersection of self and other, the reflexive process honours that intersecting, relational space” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 90).

104 “The truth about stories is that’s all we are” (King, 2003, p. 92).
One of the key qualities of a life history approach to inquiry is making meaning of context and childhood experiences of a given life. I use this framework to identify elements of my social, economic, political and cultural context and privilege both as a child and as a researcher in this work. I remain aware of my role as researcher and honor the principles of a life history approach at every level of this work. I question elements of my childhood that define who I am before I make meaning. My family’s immigrant history, religious background, postcolonial influences and lifestyle. I question again and again to try to make sense. I remain transparent on matters of spiritual practice, my awareness and knowledge of oral traditions. I take ownership of any interpretation and personal understanding. I reveal the dynamics of experiences in a boarding school and hiking through rural Kenya. I share my interaction with local women and my insecurities on being labeled “white”.

I reflect throughout and beyond the research period. I write in my journal to be active and present in the research process. I acknowledge my actions, reactions,

105 “The powers of imagination and metaphor are crucial ingredients for the process of sensitively crafting elements of a life- and the crucial meanings of it – for others to discover” (Cole & Knowles, 2001 p. 103).

106 Cole & Knowles, 2001 p. 60.

107 “Reflection represents the psychospiritual implications of content and process, how what we know changes the way we think, how content changes the way we perceive the world and think about the meaning of life. Reflection involves mindfulness, introspection, and deliberation – thinking carefully about the personal meaning of knowledge, considering the wider ramifications of personal and collective action, and using information and relationship to attend to the moment, the direct experience of here-and-now, the direct experience of nature” (Thomashow, 1995, p. 173).
thoughts, feelings and intuitions. I use words, questions, and internal dialogue throughout my story to remain honest and open with myself and with the reader. I acknowledge my healing process. I write about all and every sensory experience before, during and after my two weeks in Nairobi. I capture sounds from my hiking trip. My camera breaks two days into my trip, so I do not take pictures but I search through boxes of old photographs and artifacts. I use this content as the basis of my research.

I consider form. I need to honour the senses, the research process that guides me. I choose art. A blend of expressive writing and three-dimensional visual art represents my work. Expressive writing allows me to tell a story, to infuse detail and voice. Visual art opens up a different language, seeks a sense of contemplation. Both invite meaning. Combined they express my understandings of the relationship between childhood experience and ecological identity. I use my

108 “Revisualizing that place with it’s smells and textures, walking through it again in your imagination, has a grounding and settling effect” (Snyder, 1990, p. 27).

109 “Humans are sentient creatures who live in a qualitative world. The sensory system that humans posses provides the means through which the qualities of the world are experienced…[and] our of experience, concepts are formed” (Eisner quoted in Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 60).

110 The use of the arts in research is not for art’s sake. It is explicitly tied to moral purposes of social responsibility and epistemological equity. Thus, the research text is intended to involve the reader/audience in an active process of meaning making that is likely to have transformative potential…The transformative process of arts-informed research speaks to the need for researchers to develop representations that address audiences in ways that do not pacify or indulge the senses but arouse them and the intellect to new heights of response and action” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, pp. 62-68).

journal entries and sound recordings to extract sensory details\textsuperscript{112} of my reflections, develop plot and tell a story. I use plain language and write in a little girl’s voice to remain authentic about my purpose for the work and encourage an emotional response to the stories.\textsuperscript{113} I spin my stories into a fabric from childhood to my relived experience and back, to develop a holistic and coherent pattern throughout the work. I integrate literature through the use of footnotes to avoid distractions from the essence of each story. I lean on dialogue and reflections within the narratives to express my understandings that are not grounded in my senses.

I use my senses and spiritual intuition to create a physical expression of my “circles of awareness.”\textsuperscript{114} I buy a fair trade basket from Ten Thousand Villages on Queen Street, Toronto to form the core of the artwork. A basket of woven circles. I needed a vessel, something round, something soft, and something cheap. The basket worked. I buy primed cotton canvas, a set of all-purpose needles and a roll of beige cotton thread. I slip the thread through the biggest needle, unroll about two feet and tie a knot at the end. I start from the bottom and sew a piece of round canvas under the basket. The needle pierces through the tightly weaved basket and

\textsuperscript{112}“Sensory-rich writing awakens the full spectrum of consciousness and our myriad ways of knowing” (Hiestand, 2007, p. 201).

\textsuperscript{113}“By shifting the boundaries between art and research, we awaken the “political,” the acts/art that provoke personal and social change, challenging us to perceive the unknown in new ways, and to bring forth the complexities of aesthetic inquiry” (Irwin, 2004, p. 71).

\textsuperscript{114}“Aesthetic work opens us up, opens up a space that interrupts the ordinary, it forces change – ours and others. Such open spaces, like being above the clouds, connect us to the human condition in a primeval way. These are spiritual dimensions, although we seldom use the words like spirit heart and soul in the academy…. Inspired work is necessary: heart and soul give inquiry it’s life, and knowing it’s future” (Neilson, 2004, p. 47).
tears the skin on my fingers as I push it in, through and out. The bottom of the basket becomes my bead. I cut a long stretch of canvas, refill my needle and attach the next piece around the diameter of my bead. This piece symbolizes hope and becomes my third “circle of awareness”. I leave it bare. I groan about the next circle and give my fingers a chance to rest.

I cut another circle and start again. I find it easier than before and settle into a pattern. I complete the canvas. I paint.115

My intuition guides me to the inside of my basket. A nest. Circles, weaves, a home. I search for a bare piece of canvas to layer the inside and create a more natural sense for home, circle five.

I look outside at the fifteen centimeters of snow that covers the ground and feel discouraged about making a nest. I bundle up and head out. I take my ski gloves, an empty basket, and a pair of scissors. I stall in my new backyard and toss the snow off a potted plant. Dry twigs protrude out of the snow. I yank the twigs and drop them in the basket. I step out on the laneway to look for more. Dried vines dangle in between the barbwire fence around a nearby school. I pull. Settled snow splashes off the fence and on my face. I reach for the scissors and snap a few vines. I come home to build my nest. A few vines scratch me and get caught on my shirt. I imagine being a bird. It feels unnatural to build the nest. I force the vines, twigs and leaves in a tangle and make a nest.

115 “…One cannot paint spirit, but one can experience it, both from inside and outside a work of art” (Irwin, 2004, p. 71).
I connect the physical expression of my “circles of awareness” and emotional narratives with photographs, simple line drawings and use symbolic titles to situate the relationship between that particular “circle of awareness” and my ecological identity. I stumble at Circle Three: Breath of Hope. How do I express breath? How do I express hope? I find a way to create an abstract reflection.

I struggle with telling a “true” story. I read through my story again and again to find reason and peace. I understand that my story reveals a shared story, the story of my family, friends and the natural world. I choose to tell because I care more about the story of a collective experience. I care more about the experience of every little girl. I find reason. I find peace. I learn what to tell and what not to tell. What matters and what doesn’t. I return to purpose, to understanding the strongest influences of my experiences. I tell as a researcher, with “care, sensitivity and respect.” I listen to my intuition, the senses that hold my experience. I share my sentient experiences. I tell in a voice filled with unconditional love and gratitude

116 “It is hardly possible to write about the real world without taking a few steps onto a slippery slope. As writers who delve into other people’s lives, we can’t stand on the edge of that slope prissily avoiding it. We are there. To operate ethically we must begin by acknowledging that” (Call & Kramer, 2007, p. 163).

117 “The moral imperative lies with the writer” (Boo, 2007, p. 177). “To write about one’s own life and the lives of family and friends is to accept that exploitation of self and others. To write about yourself and the people in your life is to accept that, in part, you are a bastard. You must face and come to understand your own demons” (Dickerson, 2007, p. 185).

118 “…When participants reveal elements of their life histories, they are revealing elements of their identity. In a sense, it is as though the participant engages in the very first level of analysis. They sift out, from their wealth of experience, versions of events and experiences…. This is the nature of re-telling experience” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 119).

119 Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 44.
for all beings that are a part of my inquiry. I protect those that travel with me on my journey to explore my life history. Where I can, I change names. In the end, I tell as a researcher and remain transparent about my intention to tell.

I write this appendix on methodology with the principles that guide my process throughout this work. I write from a place of reflection and awareness of my senses. I share my process, technique and what guides me both as participant and researcher. I speak freely about my struggles and I acknowledge the complexity and messiness of being both participant and researcher. I sometimes draw invisible lines within each circle and story. I label my researcher voice “making sense.” I stay committed to understanding context and the research question. I feel awkward telling about telling my story, but feel obligated, compelled.