THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION:  
A RELATIONAL STUDY OF THE  
ECOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AT THE  
REGENERATIVE DESIGN INSTITUTE  

by  

Katia Sol Madjidi  

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Leadership, Higher, and Adult Education  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the  
University of Toronto  

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ABSTRACT

This research project is based upon the assumption that humanity is passing through a period of great transition, or “Great Turning,” in which we have a critical opportunity to pass from a destructive “industrial growth society” to a “life-sustaining society” (Macy and Brown, 1998). I argue that the current scale of social, political, environmental, economic, psychological, and spiritual challenges reflects an underlying “disconnect disorder” (Arabena, 2006), and that these combined external and internal crises present an opportunity for widespread transformative learning and a collective shift. My core hypothesis is that this transition depends on humanity’s ability to engage in a dual process of individual and collective transformation through remembering our connections with ourselves, with one another, with the natural world, and with a sense of purposeful engagement in the world. I investigate this hypothesis through an in-depth, relational study of the Ecology of Leadership program (EOL) at the Regenerative Design Institute (RDI) in Bolinas, California, an organization that aims to “serve as catalyst for a revolution in the way humans relate to the natural world.” The Ecology of Leadership represents a unique model of transformative adult education that incorporates the
principles of “inner permaculture,” biomimicry, and regenerative design to support participants in cultivating personal and collective transformation. I introduce a “relational” theory and methodological approach, which centralizes Indigenous and ecological principles of relationship, respect, reciprocity, and regeneration. Using interviews (p=20), surveys (p=409), arts-based data (p=12), sharing circles (p=8), and participatory research, I integrate personal and participant narratives together with images, graphics, poems, and practices to bring this case study of the Ecology of Leadership to life. I also advocate for a new model of “regenerative research,” in which the research itself is life-giving and contributes to the healing, transformation, and regeneration of the researcher, the community of research, and the whole system. Based upon my interactions, observations, and interviews in the EOL program and my reflections and supportive research, I conclude by articulating the “Ecology of Transformation,” a holistic model for transformation that incorporates inner and outer change with practices for reconnection to oneself, the natural world, and the village.
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Deepest thanks and appreciation to all my relations, and especially to:

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Angela Miles
INTENTIONS/DEDICATION

For the healing, regeneration, and transformation of
ourselves, our culture and our planet.

And for my children, Jalen and Mateo, and all of the future generations.
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PRELUDE: JOURNEY TO REMEMBRANCE

This is my story. It is also the story of the hundreds of individuals who have journeyed through the garden gates of the Regenerative Design Institute (RDI) into the circle of the Ecology of Leadership (EOL). And in the broader perspective, it is the story of the role that the Ecology of Leadership plays in the healing and regeneration of our planet and the Great Story of our time.

This dissertation weaves together these three narratives—my own of unfolding relationship, growth, and transformation through my involvement in the Ecology of Leadership, the accounts of a select group of EOL participants, and the greater story of what part this model of transformative education might play in the regeneration of our society and planet. My intention is to take you, the reader, on a journey that touches your heart and provides a window into new possibilities for regenerative human relationships with ourselves, the earth, and one another—and that perhaps you may also feel those possibilities in your own life.

A Great Turning

The context for this dissertation is the premise that humanity is passing through a period of great transition, or “Great Turning” (Korten, 2006), in which we face a critical opportunity to pass from a destructive “industrial growth society” to a “life-sustaining society” (Macy, 1998). My core hypothesis is that this great transition will depend on humanity’s ability to engage in a dual process of individual and collective learning that is based upon a remembering of our connections with ourselves, with one another, with the natural world, and with a sense of purposeful engagement in the world. In this context,
my research asks: *What is the relationship between individual and collective transformative learning, and what practices observed in the Ecology of Leadership program best support transformation?*

I investigate this question through an in-depth, relational case study of the Ecology of Leadership program at the Regenerative Design Institute (RDI), an organization that aims to “serve as catalyst for a revolution in the way humans relate to the natural world” by integrating permaculture design, nature awareness, leadership development, and other components in their educational model. Using the findings from my examination of this case study, I articulate the “Ecology of Transformation,” a holistic model incorporating inner and outer change with practices for reconnection to self, nature, and the village. Throughout, I integrate images, graphics, poems, and practices that bring the Ecology of Leadership to life.

**My Story**

As written by Schlitz et al. (2007) “Consciousness transformations are profound internal shifts that result in long-lasting changes in the way that you experience and relate to yourself, others and the world” (pp. 14-15). In my experience, most people who are walking a conscious path can identify their primary moment of consciousness transformation, in which they first “woke up.” I love to hear these stories, as they tell so much about who a person is and why they are doing the work that they do in the world.

My own awakening and initiation into a conscious journey of transformative learning came at a young age. Having grown up in small town New England, I had always felt relatively content and at ease in my life—I participated in theater and dance
productions, joined the school newspaper, choirs, and sports teams, was an A student with a passion for learning, went skiing in the winter and camping in the summer, and enjoyed time with my friends and family. Although I had travelled to France at 15 to be a summer exchange student, I had very little insight into the state of global affairs and had not given much consideration to my part in it. I was on the path to becoming an actress, a musician, and a writer. However, while performing in my high school production of Godspell at the age of 16, I experienced something inside me begin to shift. Being part of a community of people playing the disciples of Christ, even in a theatrical format, started to nudge open my spiritual awareness. I now understand that experience as part of the “preparation of the soil” for a more complete consciousness transformation the following year. In short succession, I experienced a series of events in which I suddenly felt discomfort with and began to reject some of my limiting worldviews, including aspects of the social and spiritual frameworks of the white AngloSaxon, Protestant household in which I was raised. Shortly thereafter I was introduced to a global community, the Bahá’í Faith, which espoused the unity of humankind and of all religions and peoples. I simultaneously experienced an inner spiritual awakening and came to the profound realization that I was a global citizen. I decided in that moment to dedicate my life to the service of a new global civilization based upon principles of justice, peace and unity.

An experience of awakening is just the first step in catalyzing a transformative journey—for the transformation to further develop and achieve permanence, it must be followed by a series of conscious choices and experiences which deepen and anchor the shift. My first step was to defer attending university for a year to volunteer with Indigenous communities in Bolivia, an experience which further expanded my global
consciousness and led me to study Latin American Studies when I arrived at Stanford the following year. Having realized my passion for international development and education, I then seized every possible opportunity to travel abroad, working, studying, and volunteering in countries throughout Latin America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East over the next several years. These experiences in turn inspired me to design and cultivate transformative experiences for others. Building on my work conducted in remote Indigenous communities in South America, I spent five years coordinating international Indigenous youth leadership programs for Ghost River Rediscovery, an Aboriginal non-profit organization in Calgary. The mission of that organization became another important touchstone for me:

> Drawing on the strength of Indigenous culture, the wisdom of the Elders, with a philosophy of love and respect for the Earth and all peoples, Ghost River Rediscovery aims at empowering people of all ages and cultures to discover the natural world, the worlds between cultures, and the worlds within themselves. (Ghost River Rediscovery, n.d.)

In particular, the emphasis on empowering people to discover the natural world, the worlds between cultures, and the worlds within themselves became central to how I envisioned my life’s work unfolding. That work also enhanced my understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, gave me the opportunity to participate in ceremony with many different native communities in western Canada, and led me to learn from my father that I also likely have Native American ancestry on my mother’s side of my family. I was never told of this history as her family was ashamed and instructed her not to self-identify as Native, and my mother, an only child, passed away when I was young. I am still seeking to learn more about this aspect of my ancestry.
Nevertheless, learning about this helped me to understand the deep resonance I have always felt with Indigenous worldviews and communities.

In 2005, a vision to bring transformative experiences to an even wider audience led me to pursue a PhD. I arrived at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in the fall of 2006 with the intention to study the relationship between personal transformation and the greater societal shift that I see as the primary story of our time. However, as I was coming out of working with native communities, I naturally focused on Indigenous ways of knowing, both in my scholarship and teaching, as well as in my search for a dissertation topic during my first few years at OISE. I pursued a few different research proposals— including comparative Indigenous and mainstream approaches to global development in Guyana and Bolivia; women’s Indigenous civil society organizations in India, Ecuador, and Kenya; and finally, partnering with a local Indigenous organization in Ontario. These various pathways each led me through a valuable process of discovery and learning, but not to a dissertation for a variety of reasons that I will not take the space to describe here. What is important to share is that the last culminated in an unexpected experience of breakdown and collapse in the relationship with the partner organization, which, in accordance with the theme of transformative learning, then offered me the opportunity to “break through” to rediscover my original intention in pursuing the PhD. As I returned home, I remembered the heart of my purpose and work—to explore examples of educational models that cultivate the personal transformations needed to contribute to our great collective transformation. I continued to feel a passion for Indigenous ways of knowing—as will be seen in this dissertation—however, my focus broadened again to the Great Turning.
I met Dr. Gregory Cajete at an International Indigenous Education conference in Vancouver in 2007. Cajete told me about the Bioneers conference, an annual gathering in San Rafael, California, that features leading edge thinkers in the areas of ecology, social justice, Indigenous wisdom, arts, education, and more. I was inspired by Cajete to watch an online version of Paul Hawken’s 2006 Bioneers plenary talk on Blessed Unrest\(^1\), which blew my mind and opened my heart, and shaped much of my framing for this work—more of which will be described in Chapter One. However, as I was focused at the time on other topics, it took me until 2010 to finally attend Bioneers. Having by then returned to my purpose, I arrived with the intention to connect to organizations that were a part of the Great Work of the Great Turning and to find a partner and case study for my research. I had a number of potential organizations in mind, all large and well-known. I connected with individuals from each of these throughout the weekend, however, none were “clicking” as the home for my research— they were too busy, or unable to see the role for a researcher to support their work—and I was committed to pursuing research that would be collaborative and contribute directly to an organization’s purpose.

I was reaching the end of the conference with no hope in sight when I was introduced to the Ecology of Leadership through a 30-second announcement by one of its founders and program directors, Christopher Kuntzsch. We spoke briefly after the session—and that conversation was one of those events when through a very small portal of time the entire course of my life changed: a transformative moment. A few days later I arrived at the Regenerative Design Institute. Stepping out of my car and on to the land at Commonweal Garden, I immediately began to cry—my tears marking both a profound

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\(^1\) View Paul Hawken’s 2006 plenary talk at the Bioneers Conference here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1fiubmOqH4>.\n
feeling of homecoming and spiritual resonance with the land there and also the relief of knowing that after years of searching for the “right” case study, I had finally arrived. One conversation with the other program director, James Stark, confirmed the overwhelming feeling that had filled my heart, that this would be my new home. And so it is.

The past three years of my relationship with the Regenerative Design Institute and specifically with the community of the Ecology of Leadership have further transformed my life. This project has been a fully collaborative endeavor, in which I have been immersed as a participant in my own transformative process, while simultaneously researching, documenting and then contributing as a program facilitator to the transformative experiences of others. My intention is to make this journey transparent through these pages—to share my own story of transformation, and the ways that this research project has changed my life in nearly every dimension. I will weave this story with words and images, using my own artistic representations of the journey together with those shared by other EOL participants to help illuminate how EOL cultivates individual and collective transformation.

A Story of Remembrance

It’s not an EOL story; it’s the human story. It just has a particular label on it, but this is the big picture what we’re doing. We’ve got a little excuse to get together, but it’s really bigger than that.

-James Stark, Co-Director and Co-Founder of The Ecology of Leadership

This is a story about remembrance, reconnection, relationship, and regeneration.

---

2 To view the short film that I made about this journey as part of the Cultural Production Workshop with Deborah Barndt at York University, “My RDI Story,” visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rF2ACcNjc9A>.
It’s a story about how we can each engage in a process of personal healing and visioning, in order to fulfill our individual, unique purpose on this planet in this lifetime. It’s about remembering our place in connection to the natural world, entering into a healing, collaborative, co-creative relationship with our greater body, and remembering that we ARE nature (see Figure P.1). It’s about coming back together as a village, and what becomes possible when we are in a community of radical support and love, where we can collectively heal and together develop the courage to step into the fullness of our visions (see Figure P.2). It’s a story about the connection between the transformation of our inner realms—the personal beliefs, thought processes, emotions, and worldviews that make up our internal experience—and the transformation of our outer

Figure P.1 – Connecting with the Buddha Tree (photo by Christopher Kuntzsch)

Figure P.2 – The Ecology of Leadership village (photo by M. Sophia Santiago)
realms—our visible actions, work and ways of being in the world.

These threads come together to tell a story about ecological transformation—about the integration of inner and outer change, supported by practices for connection to self, nature and village. And ultimately, it’s a story about the Great Turning— the great transition and transformation of our greater society and planetary relations toward an ecologically regenerative, socially just, and deeply connected way of being.

**Overview of Research Findings and Dissertation Layout**

This dissertation is structured in five major parts, with shorter chapters in each part. It is framed by the ecological metaphor of a tree, which represents an individual going through a transformative process, from the roots and soil up into the canopy, while embedded in a larger landscape and context. Part One describes the greater landscape and the study design, contextually, methodologically, and conceptually. Part Two begins with a review of the literature regarding transformative learning, and describes the components of entering into a transformative journey. Parts Three and Four are the heart of the dissertation, focusing respectively on the inner transformation process and the outer transformation process, through practices for reconnection to self, nature, and village. Part Five provides a summary of the overall transformation experienced through the Ecology of Leadership and presents conclusions to this dissertation.

In the following section, I give a brief overview of the content of each chapter, and summarize the major findings that will be presented in each.
PART ONE: LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT AND DESIGN

Chapter One: Contextual Landscape

In Chapter One, I examine the landscape into which this case study sits, including the world context and the core literature and perspectives that inform my dissertation. I set the stage by framing the current global situation as an unprecedented moment of both global crisis and opportunity, or “Great Turning” (Korten, 2006; Macy and Brown, 1998). I explore the external or surface aspects of a world in crisis—ecologically, economically, socially, politically, and psychologically. I then argue that these external crises reflect a deeper, internal “disconnect disorder” (Arabena, 2006: p. 39), in which due to alienation from traditional ways of living with the land and one another, people have become fundamentally disconnected from themselves, from nature, from one another, and from meaningful engagement in the world. I suggest that there is hope in the breakdown—an opportunity for breakthrough and transformation or “catagenesis” (Homer-Dixon, 2006), and a widespread rite of passage/initiation. I discuss the antidote to the disconnect disorder as education that cultivates reconnection and regeneration, and introduce diverse perspectives on wholeness and reconnection and the rise of a great social movement or “Blessed Unrest.” Together this framing creates the context or landscape into which my exploration of the case study of the Ecology of Leadership is embedded.

Chapter Two: A Way of Remembering

In this chapter, I introduce the case study for this dissertation, the Ecology of Leadership program at the Regenerative Design Institute, and the rationale for how I came to select
this as the research site. I describe my research approach, and define a Relational theory and methodology, drawing upon Indigenous and ecological principles of relationship, respect, reciprocity, and regeneration. I present my research design, a mixed-methods approach incorporating observation, in-depth participation, interviews, sharing circles, surveys, and arts-based inquiry, and discuss the implementation of these methods. I also provide insight into my experience of conducting the research in a participatory and collaborative format over the past two and a half years, and introduce the idea of “Regenerative Research” as both a methodology and a key finding of this research project.

Chapter Three: An Ecological Framework for Exploring Transformation

Chapter Three introduces the conceptual framework that will shape the exploration of the research case study and questions. This framework is based upon an ecological perspective of transformation and has two key components that are introduced in the chapter. The first is a model for understanding the relationship between inner and outer transformation, using a concept taken directly from the Ecology of Leadership work. This framework is termed “the Tree Model,” and it is used to describe the relationship between what happens on an inner level or in the “roots and soil” and that which happens in the external world, or in the “canopy.” Second, based upon my interactions, observations, and interviews in the EOL program and my reflections and supportive research, I propose an ecological, or holistic, model of transformation that includes practices for reconnection in four key areas: self, nature, other (village), and world. I demonstrate how this concept can be overlaid with the Tree Model to provide a holistic
framework for exploring and cultivating transformation. The combination of these two models forms the structure or backbone for much of this dissertation. In this chapter, I also define the Ecology of Leadership and other key concepts and terms that will be used throughout the dissertation.

**PART TWO: ENTERING A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY**

**Chapter Four: Arriving at the Garden Gates**

In Chapter Four, I review the literature describing the process of transformative learning to provide a theoretical foundation for how transformative learning occurs in the case of the Ecology of Leadership. I introduce for the first time the participants in this study, and discuss what brings them to the “Garden Gates,” or to the Ecology of Leadership program and the Regenerative Design Institute. Drawing upon my research with EOL participants, I describe the factors as both experiences of disconnection and sensed possibility for connection in multiple areas of participants’ lives, including their relationship with their selves and their inner development, their connection with the natural world, their relationships with others, and their sense of purpose and meaningful engagement in the world. I find that it is not one factor which brings individuals into a transformative process, but rather a multifaceted set of experiences that are as holistic as the participants themselves.

**Chapter Five: Cultivating Fertile Soil**

In Chapter Five, I discuss how the conditions are created in the Ecology of Leadership to cultivate fertile soil for a healing and transformative journey. I describe the
participants’ experiences of arrival the first program weekend, and their welcome to the land at Commonweal Garden. I then introduce the concept of core routines, or essential practices that help to anchor participants’ inner and outer transformation through the program. I discuss each of the core routines in detail, including gratitude, setting intentions, the “sit spot” (a deep nature connection practice), and journaling, and share how participants’ experiences with each of these practices contributed to their transformative learning.

Chapter Six: Building the Container

In Chapter Six, I examine how a safe container or context is created for healing and transformation of participants in the Ecology of Leadership. I present the formal structures and tiers of support that help make up the EOL village. I examine the role of the circle, and the multi-layered levels of organization designed to support participants in the program. Following this, I describe a few of the activities that help the group to bond and develop trust, including an activity called presencing and determining a shared set of agreements. I close by briefly discussing other aspects that help to build the village culture on the first weekend.

PART THREE: INTO THE ROOTS AND SOIL

Chapter Seven: Entering a Healing Journey

In Chapter Seven, I discuss how the EOL program cultivates healing and transformation on an inner level in order to manifest change and transformation on the outer level. This begins by revisiting the tree model, and a description of the concept of
natural healing and bioremediation. Key to this stage is planting the seed of possibility for entering into “Rumi’s Field” —a place where judgment is replaced by curiosity and acceptance. I end by describing the themes that emerged from the research data regarding the core principles of a healing journey.

**Chapter Eight: Healing with Self**

In this chapter, I discuss how healing through cultivating connection with oneself occurs in the Ecology of Leadership. I discuss the core EOL practices intended to promote this healing, such as cultivating inner awareness, the life story exercise, patterns journaling, and the ownership process. I describe how these practices were transformative for EOL participants’ inner healing journeys, including for my own.

**Chapter Nine: Healing with Nature**

In Chapter Nine, I discuss the role of nature connection in the Ecology of Leadership for supporting the inner healing process. I share participants’ experiences on how remembering our relationship with the natural world supports inner transformation. Themes from the interviews that are addressed in this chapter include learning to be held by the “bigger body,” cultivating mindfulness and presence, and remembering that we are nature.

**Chapter Ten: Healing with the Village**

In Chapter Ten, I discuss the role of the “village” or community in EOL for supporting individuals’ healing processes. I present the themes that emerged from the
research, including learning to be held by the village, the benefit of collective healing, and the role of vulnerability, and authenticity. Drawing upon participants’ experiences, I propose that the “healing of one is the healing of all,” and demonstrate the relationship between individual healing and collective healing in the EOL program.

**PART FOUR: EXPANDING INTO THE CANOPY**

*Chapter Eleven: Creating with the Self*

In Chapter Eleven, I move up into the canopy, examining the EOL practices that support transformation in more of the seen or external world, beginning with practices for creating with oneself. I present the concept of designing your life, and introduce the practices of the life wheel, the creative scene, setting a North Star, making commitments, and the Regenerative Leadership Pattern. I discuss EOL participants’ experiences with these practices, and how they apply them to engage their learning through a project.

*Chapter Twelve: Creating with Nature*

In Chapter Twelve, I examine how participants’ experiences in EOL demonstrate that nature can become an ally and teacher in manifesting our visions and creating in the world. I discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews, such as sourcing our actions from our bigger body, nature as mentor/teacher, and nature as metaphor. I also discuss the role of nature in individuals’ leadership in the world.
Chapter Thirteen: Creating with the Village

In Chapter Thirteen, I examine the role of connections with others and the “village” in manifesting EOL participants’ visions. Central themes addressed in this chapter include the value of witnessing, accountability, intimacy, being held by a group in one’s visions, cultivating support outside of the village, and village connection and leadership. I also discuss the role of the village in renewing the relationship of the masculine and feminine.

PART FIVE: THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

Chapter Fourteen: Transformations in the World

In Chapter Fourteen, I summarize how the Ecology of Leadership program’s practices together cultivate overall transformation of participants’ inner and outer realms. Looking holistically, I ask: What becomes possible for EOL participants through engaging the EOL practices of reconnection to self, nature and other? Some of the main findings include the transformation of relationships (romantic, family, friendship, colleagues), jobs, living situations, service paths, and ways of being, in addition to the manifestation of specific projects and visions.

Chapter Fifteen: The Ecology of Transformation

In this final chapter, I address potential areas of growth for the Ecology of Leadership program, and suggest future directions for development. I revisit the concept of regenerative and relational research, and discuss the influence of this research on the case study community, as well as the overall implications of this pilot research method. I discuss limitations of the research and areas for further study. I conclude this study of the
Ecology of Leadership by delineating a theory of the Ecology of Transformation, which includes a return to the context of the Great Turning and a discussion of the role of this work in the wider social, ecological, and spiritual transformation of our times.

**An Invitation**

As we begin this journey, I’d like to invite you to join me and the other participants in this story in a place called “Rumi’s field.” The idea of Rumi’s field is based upon a poem by Jalal’u’ddin Rumi, a 13th century Sufi poet, which says, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field—I’ll meet you there.” (Barks, 1995).

I discuss the concept of Rumi’s Field in detail in Chapter Seven, but in brief, it indicates a way of being that is infused with curiosity and open-mindedness, where one endeavors to suspend judgment and fixed notions of truth to bring attention to what is really true and alive in the present moment. This might seem like a strange proposal, in the context of an academic dissertation, where the critical and judging mind often reigns supreme, and the intention is frequently to “prove” one’s prowess in a particular area of knowledge. However, in the course of this research project, I have found that one of the most important requirements to powerfully engage in a journey of healing, learning and transformation is a willingness to surrender existing assumptions, and to step into Rumi’s field, to meet myself and others with an “empty cup.”

This practice of stepping into Rumi’s field is sourced for me not only in this Ecology of Leadership work, but also from my experiences working in Indigenous communities, with mindfulness practices, with Freirian pedagogy and dialogue practice,
and in many other likeminded circles and councils, where a similar quality of presence is requested. As Paulo Freire (1970) says, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 53). For me, this is about being in a constant learning posture, in which we are all always both learning and teaching, and in which one shares and listens from a place of openness, curiosity, and the heart.

It is therefore my intention to create a space throughout these pages where Rumi’s field can be present, so that together we may co-discover the story that wants to be told. I invite you, the reader to join me in Rumi’s field, and to choose to become an active participant and subject in this journey. I invite you to bring your truth, your authenticity, and your vulnerability. Perhaps as I begin to introduce various practices of the Ecology of Leadership, you might even try them for yourself—begin a sit spot and/or gratitude practice, draw your own tree model, engage your own inner tracking, make your own creative scenes—and see what happens in that process. My hope is that your engagement with these pages may contribute to your own healing, regeneration, and transformation.

Ultimately, my intention is that this work join the growing body of literature and practices of the Great Works of the Great Turning, that through it I may continue to fulfill my own personal purpose in this lifetime, and that it may contribute to the highest good for all.

All My Relations.
PART ONE:

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT AND DESIGN
CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXTUAL LANDSCAPE

Future generations, if there is a livable world for them, will look back at the epochal transition we are making to a life-sustaining society. And they may well call this the time of the Great Turning. (Macy and Brown, 1998)

This doctoral research project is founded upon the fundamental premise that humanity is passing through a time of great transition, an unprecedented convergence of immense global crisis and historic opportunity. Central to this premise is the proposition that the scope and impact of our growing ecological, economic, political, social, psychological and spiritual crises could, rather than spiral us down into collapse and doom, instead invite humanity into a great global process of transformative learning that catalyzes us forward from a destructive “industrial growth society” to a “life sustaining society” (Macy and Brown, 1998). The importance of this global moment is being advanced by scholars and actors from across the disciplines, and has been termed the “Great Turning” (Macy and Brown, 1998; Korten, 2006), the “Shift,” the “fulfillment of Prophecy” (D. Longboat, personal communication, 2009), “catagenesis” (Homer-Dixon, 2006), and “the sunset of an ecologically illiterate civilization” (Ausubel, 2010). As stated by Kenny Ausubel, co-founder of Bioneers, “Like a baby being born, a new world is crowning” (2010).

Foundational to this shift and critical to our survival and prosperity as a global community will be the speed and depth with which humanity is able to transform our ways of relating with ourselves, one another and the earth. The core theory that I advance is thus that humanity’s capacity to make this great transition will depend on our ability and willingness to engage in a dual process of individual and collective transformative learning that awakens, connects, cultivates capacity for, and engages people and
organizations in building an ecologically regenerative, socially just and spiritually connected world.

A World in Crisis

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. (The Earth Charter, 2000)

Over the past few decades, humanity has embarked upon a new stage of global development, unparalleled in our collective history. Many group these changes under the banner of “globalization.” Although some scholars argue that human society has long been global, migrating and trading goods internationally for centuries, what most agree upon is the change in scope, speed, and scale which characterize the current phenomenon (Mundy and Murphy, 2001). Human society today has 100,000 times the impact of that of our ancestors; in other words, our influence in one year now equals 100,000 years of our prior impact on the earth (Hawken 2006: 34). There is no question that we are now interacting with an unprecedented degree of influence on one another and the earth.

With these changes, we are facing the challenges of a growing global society that is unsustainably and unhealthily rooted in a foundation built upon industrialization, colonization, and capitalism. Such dilemmas include, but are not limited to: environmental impact and climate change; diminishing availability of, combined with increasing demand for, energy resources; population growth and urban migration;
widespread poverty and increasing gaps in income distribution; the increasing prevalence of disease (many think due to our growing environmental toxicity), HIV/AIDS, and the threat of a new, global super-virus; food and clean water shortages; major clashes of ideology and faith; ongoing civil unrest and warfare; and local, national, and international governance gaps.

Thomas Homer-Dixon (2006) writes of five tectonic stressors accumulating “deep under the fabric of our societies”: population stress, energy stress, environmental stress, climate stress, and economic stress. Each stressor has complex layers of impact. For example, we are expected to add another 2-3 billion people to our global population in the next 25 years. This fact is daunting in and of itself, but the impact is compounded by rising populations in poorer societies and declining populations in richer societies, as well as the growth of megacities. The “population growth” factor will thus also have an enormous impact on migration patterns as well as on environment and energy resources.

In the area of economic stress, instabilities in the global economic system are evident, as the world has been experiencing ongoing ripples from the near economic collapse of U.S. and global financial markets in 2007. Growing inequalities of income distribution also have new meaning in a society where Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are increasingly accessible and pervasive. Children in poorer societies that were previously “isolated” from Western culture are inundated with images of what they should have. The sense of individual entitlement to and drive for material goods cultivated in capitalist society takes on different meaning as the billions of people around the world demand the same goods. A key example of this at the moment can be seen in China; it may not matter how many hybrid cars or green energy forms we adopt in North
America if China continues to grow at its current rate. Homer-Dixon further identifies two key multipliers of stress as the rising speed of connectivity of our global activities and the now very real possibility for small terrorist groups to access nuclear weapons and thereby wreak widespread destruction and chaos.

Jared Diamond (2005) also identifies a set of factors which contribute to a society’s collapse. Diamond writes that people often ask which of the possible crises would be worst; he answers that any one of them will send human society into a dangerous downward spiral, but that the most significant is a society’s inability to respond to environmental crises (p. 11). And yet, the fact that we are in a time of environmental crisis and rapid, human-induced climate change has become impossible to deny: temperatures are rising, with ten of the past twelve years being the hottest on record (Peterson et al., 2009); the glaciers and polar ice caps (key sources of fresh water) are melting with alarming speed; more than 297 species have moved closer to the poles (Gore, 2006); we reached an alarming 400 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere in June 2013 (well past the “safe” limits of 350 ppm; Hansen, 2008) and this continues to climb; spring comes a full two weeks earlier than it did twenty years ago (McKibben 1999: ix–xx); we are experiencing an increase in hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, droughts, and other natural disasters; and the evidence goes on. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007), and as cited by NASA, “Scientific evidence for warming of the climate system is unequivocal.” We have reached a time of “Peak Everything”—oil, natural gas, coal, grain, fresh water, minerals and ores, and more (Heinberg, 2007). According to Homer-Dixon (2006), “we can still say confidently that we’re sliding toward a planetary emergency” (pp. 17–18).
Edmund O’Sullivan (1999) writes, “Our world, the place in which we find ourselves and where we play out the significant events of our lives, is sending us distress signals. We must concede that the planet which we inhabit is in trouble” (p. 235).

The Inner Crisis

Beyond and beneath these “outer” forms of crisis, a deeper fault line has been growing. In a global society that holds the accumulation of material wealth as the standard for progress and development, there lies an inner crisis of meaning which is plaguing humanity. As cited by Jack Miller (2001):

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers; wider freeways but narrower viewpoints; we spend more but have less; we buy more but enjoy it less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences but less time; we have more degrees but less sense; more knowledge but less judgment; more expenses but more problems; more medicine but less wellness. We have multiplied our possessions but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We’ve learned how to make a living but not a life; we’ve added years to life, not life to years. We’ve been all the way to the moon and back but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor. We’ve conquered outer space but not inner space. (p. 2)

This inner crisis is encapsulated by Kerry Arabena (2006), an Indigenous Torres Strait Islander, as a “disconnect disorder” (p. 39). The focus on anthropocentric individualism prominent in Western culture has led humans to see themselves as separate, self-sufficient beings. Combined with patriarchal, capitalistic and monotheism-inspired objectives of conquering the land and reaping its resources (including the human inhabitants) for competitive good, humanity has lost touch with its original connection with its own self, with the land and with one another.
In *The Great Transformation* (1944), Karl Polanyi describes the root of this disconnect as the introduction of the market society, in which “man under the name of labor, (and) nature under the name of land, were made available for sale” (p. 130–131), and civilization “subordinate(d) the substance of society itself to the laws of the market” (p. 71). Polyani argues that to subject “labour” (human beings) and “land” (nature) to the tools of the market leads to the destruction of society, writing that “leaving the fate of soil and people to the market would be tantamount to annihilating them.” (p. 131). In this, Polanyi draws centrally on the Marxist theory of alienation. Gabor Maté refers to this same theory in his Bioneers plenary speech in 2012, describing the root cause of today’s widespread epidemic of addictions and disconnection as the alienation of society from its own humanity, from the land, from one another, and from its sense of meaning and purpose. These four primary areas of disconnection form the central problem that this dissertation aims to address.

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**Disconnection from Self**

On a personal level, individuals are suffering from a loss of orientation and connection within their own selves. Michael Lerner, Jewish Rabbi and founder of the organization TIKKUN, views this crisis as fundamentally spiritual in nature, as described in his book *Spirit Matters* (2000). Jack Miller (2002), specialist in spirituality and education, writes, “When we view life from a spiritual perspective, we see ourselves connected to something larger than ourselves. This ‘something’ has a mysterious quality that can give rise to a sense of awe and wonder” (p. 95). George Maté refers to this same theory in his Bioneers plenary speech in 20123, describing the root cause of today’s widespread epidemic of addictions and disconnection as the alienation of society from its own humanity, from the land, from one another, and from its sense of meaning and purpose. These four primary areas of disconnection form the central problem that this dissertation aims to address.

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Dei (2002) also addresses spirituality in the context of African Indigenous ways of knowing, saying, “Spirituality and spiritual discourses . . . emphasize connectedness, belongingness . . . well-being, love, compassion, peaceful coexistence with nature and among groups” (p. 123). When individuals have lost their feeling of connection to this larger context, it can lead to a sense of disconnection from one’s own self.

The psychological ramifications of this spiritual “disconnect disorder” on a personal level are clear: according to the National Institute of Mental Health (2013), a staggering 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about one in four adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year, with a good percentage of those diagnoses attributable to anxiety (18.1% of Americans) and depression (6.7%); and more than 90% of the 33 million annual suicides in the US attributable to mental illness. In the materially richest nation in the world, people are tormented in their inner worlds, feeling more disconnected and less at peace than ever before. A growing number of children and teenagers are also on psychological medications; a 2003 study published in the journal Psychiatric Service indicated that anti-depressant prescriptions for children had doubled over the previous five-year period, with the highest increase (66%) in the preschool age bracket (Louv, 2005, p. 49).

Joanna Macy (1998) points to the experience of despair that sits at the root of this personal crisis of disconnection for the self, saying, “Despair is a natural response to our present historical situation; it cannot and should not be banished by injections of optimism or sermons on ‘positive thinking’. Our encounter with despair must be acknowledged and worked through at a deep level of the psyche” (p. 35). O’Sullivan (2002) also speaks to the unspoken grief that arises in individuals in response to the
external crises humanity is facing: “In terms of facing these profound issues of survival, there are three learning aspects that we do not ordinarily identify with learning: the dynamics of denial, despair, and grief” (p. 5). The more that this grief is suppressed in individuals and in the system, the more disconnected individuals begin to feel from their own selves. As will be addressed in this dissertation, acknowledging and releasing this grief is a central step in the healing of this disconnect with self.

**Disconnection from the Natural World**

Central to humanity’s disconnection is its alienation from the land base upon which it lives and to the natural world at large. Humanity’s attempt through the agricultural and industrial revolutions to tame and harness the wilds has led to massive overuse and degradation of the planet, not to mention a loss of feeling of connection and oneness with our natural world. Thomas Berry (1999) writes about this misguided nature of the human tendency to control our environment:

> We misconceive our role if we consider our mission to “civilize” or “domesticate” the planet—as though wildness is something destructive rather than the ultimate creative modality of any form of earthly being. We are not here to control. We are here to become integral with the larger Earth community. The community itself and each of its members has ultimately a wild component, a creative spontaneity that is its deepest reality, its most profound mystery. (p. 48)

In Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv (2005) discusses the disconnection of humanity from the natural world, diagnosing humanity with the term “nature-deficit disorder” (p. 36), which he describes as “the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses” (p. 36). He attributes this to the skyrocketing rate of
children being raised indoors, in smaller spaces, with increasing exposure to technology, and decreasing exposure to outdoor activities.

Research demonstrates that the lack of deep nature connection is a contributing factor to many other challenges, including ADD and ADHD (Louv, 2005; Young, 2010). Selhub and Logan (2012) write, “Less contact with nature, particularly in one’s young years, appears to remove a layer of protection against psychological stress and opportunity for cognitive rejuvenation” (p. 3), and document Japanese research indicating that “nature deprivation may have wide-ranging effects on the immune system” (p. 3).

In turn, nature connection can be an antidote for these and other challenges. Louv writes, “Nature is often overlooked as a healing balm for the emotional hardships in a child’s life” (p. 49). Jon Young (2010) speaks about his experience of 25 years of mentoring children and adults in nature awareness practices:

As the effect of nature connection, Coyote Mentoring, and the seeds of a healthier culture formed, children and adults both began to thrive in this new environment. They developed inner quietness, a calm presence, a lust for adventure, deep curiosity, and that twinkle in the eye that says so much. There was much laughter, there was hope, there were tears of joy and sorrow—and all of these feeling were freely expressed. . . . There were stories of adventures, of addictions dropped, of unhealthy habits left behind, of courage to overcome obstacles, of restored hope, joy and love—and in so many, many stories the expressed conviction of lives, marriages and families saved. (pp. 490–491)

Throughout this dissertation, the role of deep nature connection in restoring personal well-being will be further explored.

**Disconnection from One Another**

When individuals consider the topic of feeling connected, or disconnected, often the strongest association they have is their connections with other people. Chris Crowley
and Harry Lodge (2004) write about the importance of social connection for humans, saying,

> We evolved as social pack animals, like wolves and dolphins. It’s not a choice; our survival depends on being part of a group. No one has ever gone into the Amazon jungle and found an isolated person; it’s always a tribe. There is no such thing as a solitary human in nature, because isolation is fatal. (p. 245)

Nevertheless, Western societies in particular have evolved to focus on the individual or small groupings such as the couple or the nuclear family as the central social form of organization. Capitalist values have led to a sense of pride in each person or family unit having their own house, their own vehicle, and their own separate property. Meanwhile, North American families are in major crisis and breakdown, with more than 50% of marriages ending in divorce. As Jon Young says (personal communication, May 2011), “Nuclear families are radioactive.”

Crowley and Lodge (2004) demonstrate the impact of a change in social structure from a communitarian-based system to a more individualistic society in their description of the breakdown in social structure after the fall of the Soviet Union. They write that “life expectancy for Russian men plummeted from sixty-four years to fifty-seven years. . . . Heart attack and cancer rates soared, as did depression, alcoholism, suicide, accidents and violent deaths” (p. 259). They also document how intimate personal relationships can be a strong indicator for men’s health and life expectancy: “Single men die years before married men: more cancers, more heart attacks…Having close friends predicts survival, and the more connected, the higher the survival rate” (p. 259).

In the framing of this dissertation, the aspect of connection to others is often referred to as the “village,” which I use to refer to a sense of deeply interdependent community, such as a small village would have been in a healthy cultural context.
**Disconnection from Meaning and Purpose**

In addition to the disconnection from self, nature, and village, there is another overarching layer of discontent—individuals’ ability to contribute meaningfully in the world. While working as a psychologist for many years in the United States, Lerner (2000) repeatedly witnessed that the primary issue for his clients was a search for more meaning and purpose in life. He writes,

> The thing that people most frequently miss at work is the ability to connect their work to a higher purpose and to interact with others in a loving, caring way. . . . The deprivation of these needs produces what we call alienation at work and in society. (p. 74)

Although many of Lerner’s clients had good jobs and incomes, the work culture (including the drive for more wealth, the demand for higher productivity, and the decreasing separation between home and work time) was creating alienation and isolation (Lerner, 2000, pp. 74–83). Lerner realized that what people were seeking was an opportunity to connect their work to a higher purpose. He writes, “Meaning, not money or power, was the thing they were missing.” (Lerner, 2000, p. 81) O’Sullivan (1999) also documents this, referring to two decades of studies of quality of life by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1993, 1997) demonstrating that money and consumption do not lead to happy & fulfilled lives (p. 237).

In summary, humanity is facing a time of greater urgency and crisis than ever before. Ecologically, politically, economically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually, we are in crisis. However, as I will demonstrate in the next section, I argue that the combination of these factors creates an opportunity for a great transformative shift.
The Great Turning

It is the premise of The Great Turning . . . that we humans stand at a defining moment that presents us with an irrevocable choice. Our collective response will determine how our time is remembered for so long as the human species survives. (Korten, 2006, p. 3)

According to theories of transformative learning, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Four, transformation or change is often catalyzed by an experience of difficulty or crisis. On a global scale, the confluence of these internal and external crises creates the ideal conditions for a moment of great transformative learning and shift as a global species. Several scholars argue that these large-scale dilemmas present the possibility for positive and cooperative transformation. Homer-Dixon’s *The Upside of Down* (2006) refers to these crises as opportunities for “catagenesis,” a coined term combining the root for “death” with that of “birth.” Catagenesis has the potential to lead to great creativity, innovation, and rebirth. This concept is shared by scientists as well; Hazel Henderson (1987) describes the three key aspects of transformation as 1) The Breakdown Zone (which is war-like and de-structuring), 2) The Fibrillation or Bifurcation Zone (a transitional mode of preparing for change), and 3) The Breakthrough Zone (pp. 144–166). Lerner (2000) refers to the current moment as an “exhilarating challenge” (p. 238). Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown (1998) refer to the current breakdown in systems across the board as “The Great Unravelling,” and argue that they also present the fertile ground for a “Great Turning” towards a more regenerative, life-sustaining society.

The theory of the Great Turning was first delineated by Macy and Brown in their book *Coming Back to Life* (1998), was further elaborated upon by David Korten in *The*
Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community (2006), and has now been adopted as a core framework for an entire ecological, social and spiritual movement. According to Korten, “The Great Turning provides a powerful framework for understanding our time within a deep historical context and for defining the collective choice we must now make as a species” (2006). Macy and Brown describe the Great Turning as the shift that humanity is making from an “Industrial Society” to a “Life-Sustaining Society.”

According to Macy and Brown, there are three core components to this transition:

1) “Holding actions”—All those actions which serve to slow the current process of environmental and social destruction and injustice.

2) “Gaian structures”—The innovation and creation of life-sustaining structures, systems and alternatives in every arena of society.

3) Shifts in consciousness—Combining scientific and spiritual wisdoms to shift the very foundation of our worldviews and assumptions to be able to see and feel the interconnectedness of all life. This includes a shift in consciousness, values, belief systems, and the questioning of our assumptions about the nature of reality.

The nature of our crisis thus presents an opportunity for looking for new models and for catalyzing major transformation. As stated by Van Jones (2008),

If the peril weren’t real, if the actual threat of complete collapse weren’t real, it wouldn’t call forth in us this new sensibility, this new maturity, this new wisdom that we need as a species. And we in our lifetimes have the opportunity, by being grounded, by being hopeful, by being connected to the sacred, to help to midwife that process. That’s our calling in our lifetimes.
How to consciously meet these crises, and midwife the transition, personally and collectively, is the foundational question driving this doctoral study and which will be explored through the case study of the Ecology of Leadership.

*An Opportunity for Remembrance and Reconnection*

As will be demonstrated in this dissertation, the antidote to the disconnect disorder is the reestablishment of relationship and connection, with our own sense of self and meaning in life, with the earth, and with all peoples. The evidence of our interrelatedness has been argued from a variety of perspectives, ranging from scientific to Indigenous to religious contexts. The realization of our interdependence is critical to the way forward, as will be demonstrated in this dissertation. Holly-Lynn Busier et. al (1997) write:

> Human development theorists…have helped us realize that we are not isolated individuals, but rather relational beings who exist and continue to grow in connection with others (citing Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991). We see intimate relationships, the process of “being in relation,” as vital experiences which move us into learning and understanding more about others, ourselves, and our world. (p. 166)

> From a scientific perspective, the discovery of our molecular relatedness has been explored and proven in areas such as biology, chemistry, physics, and chaos theory (O’Sullivan, 1999). Anne Goodman (2006) refers to Albert Einstein, who she says spoke of an “optical delusion of our consciousness” whereby we as human erroneously experience ourselves as separate from the whole, the universe. What we need to do to situate and reconnect ourselves, he tells us, is to develop ever-widening “circles of compassion” to eventually embrace all life and the living earth. (p. 38)

> The root of the discipline of “ecology” is the idea that everything is connected. “Eco” means home; thus ecology is the study of our home. Interestingly, this is also the
root for words like “Economics.” Imagine if we understood the discipline of economics as a way of supporting life in our earth home, rather than just the management of the household, as critiqued by feminist economist Marilyn Waring. James Lovelock (1987) revolutionized ways of thinking about the earth both within and outside of scientific circles, with the advent of his “Gaia” theory, in which he described the earth and its environment as a living, breathing, interdependent and unified organism. The emerging field of biomimicry urges us to learn from the lessons of the natural world. For example, just as it is the structure of human cells to cooperate, human society also includes cooperative organizing as part of its natural state and requirement for life.

David Bohm (1988), physicist, writes:

I suggest that if we are to survive in a meaningful way in the face of this disintegration of the present world order, a truly creative movement to a new kind of wholeness is needed, a movement that must ultimately gives credence to a new order as was the modern to the medieval order. We cannot go back to the premodern order. A postmodern world must come into being before the modern world destroys itself so thoroughly that little can be done for a long time to come. (pp. 23–24)

From an Indigenous perspective, the notion of relationship is central to ways of knowing and being in the world. Gregory Cajete (1994), Pueblo Tewa educator writes, “Indigenous education is, in its truest form, about learning relationships in context” (p. 183). Renee Shilling (2003), Anishinaabe scholar, gives a visceral explanation of her own realization of her relationship with all beings, including the lives of her ancestors:

In a very significant way, my spirit awakened and began to listen to the world that I lived in. Most important, I began to listen to my spirit. I searched for meaning in my human existence. Through this, I recognized that my blood and cells inherited all the joy, the happiness, the pain, and the fear of my ancestors. I began to understand that my spirit and my body had histories of their own and that I, through thought, was to make sense of my current existence. There became a new meaning to harmonizing the body, mind, and spirit. And my life was no longer just about me. (p. 152)
The value of interdependence is also promoted in a diversity of religious contexts. Christian theologians such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry have challenged dominant conceptions of the Church and have pioneered the field of Eco-theology. In Buddhism, the notion of interdependence has been long established; Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the Dalai Lama are leaders currently promoting these concepts both in the East and in the West. The Bahá’í Faith, founded in the 1844, promotes unity between all peoples as its central tenet. Its founder, Bahá’u’llah, wrote, “So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.” Rabbi Michael Lerner (2000) addresses the critical nature of coming back together as a human community:

Much of human history has been the history of smaller groups beginning to see common interests and ties to larger groups, first as clans, then as tribes, then as peoples, then as nations. The next stage of human history requires that we take the next step in the evolution of consciousness and begin to see ourselves as one—as deeply connected, sharing one planet. (p. 47)

He also addresses the connection between individual well-being and collective, saying,

If we understood ourselves as part of the Totality of All, saw our place as part of the Unity of All Being, and recognized our intrinsic need for each other, we’d realize that our own individual well-being and self-interest absolutely requires the well-being of every other person and of the planet itself. (p. 28)

The remembrance of this sense of connection and relationship, with self, nature, village, and the world, is the foundation for my examination of the case study of the Ecology of Leadership.

Blessed Unrest

Before completing the contextual landscape, it is important to note the growing rise of a global civil society movement. Over the past fifteen years, interest in how
international civil society groups are influencing global processes has rapidly increased. Although civil society groups and social movements have long been a part of political life (Scholte, 2005), just as globalization itself is not actually a new process, it is the degree and complexity with which civil society is now coming together trans-nationally (Scholte, 2005; Mundy and Murphy, 2001), the phenomenal speed and scale at which civil society groups are proliferating (Mische, 2001; Hawken, 2006), and the perceived growth in influence that these groups can effect (Castells, 2005) that defines the new character of today’s global or transnational civil society.

The rise of this movement can be conceptualized theoretically as the great “countermovement” of the 21st century. According to Polanyi (1944), society will respond spontaneously to destructive market forces by creating a countermovement to protect itself and the land. According to Richard Sandbrook (2009), today’s extreme globalization structures, trade liberalization, impacts on poverty, environmental destruction, social justice, rise of the corporations, etc. have created powerful conditions for the rise of a new double movement.

Paul Hawken (2006) directly echoes this theory by suggesting that the current global social movement is humanity’s collective “immune response to resist and heal the effects of political corruption, economic disease, and ecological degradation” (p. 12). In Blessed Unrest (2006), Hawken identifies a growing movement of at least 1 million and perhaps 10 million organizations that are working in diverse ways to improve the earth and our human condition, and describes the impact of this growing global web as the building of the “largest social movement in history.” This movement has gained notable
strength as it has coalesced in recent years around issues of social and environmental
crime change and anti-globalization. Hawken (2008) states,

And we are now moving to a world that is created by community. . . . I began to
ask myself the question, how many groups were there in the world addressing
environment and social justice issues? . . . Now we know it’s well over a million
organizations in the world, could be as many two million. And I realized that this
movement to restore the environment, this movement to address the suffering that
people are experiencing today, is the largest social movement in history. . . . The
only thing we can do now is start to connect and collaborate and come together in
more powerful ways, and that’s what we’re starting to see.

According to Hawken, this movement is completely decentralized and grassroots, and
can be compared to a network of nodes of change, such as the underground root system
of mushrooms, called mycelium. Each one of the organizations documented by Hawken
represents a separate node, but that is interconnected to the rest and which together form
the “largest social movement in history.”

The Ecology of Leadership program at the Regenerative Design Institute thus
represents one node within the landscape of a global, grassroots uprising for ecological,
social, and spiritual change. As this dissertation unfolds, it is important to remember that
EOL is only one example of a small group of individuals working toward transformative
change, which through its connections with other grassroots organizations and programs
forms part of a much larger movement.

*Into the Ecology of Leadership*

In this chapter, I described the global context of massive scale external and internal
crisis, a global disconnect disorder, and the related opportunity for personal and
collective transformative learning to occur through the Great Turning and Blessed Unrest.

In this context, I ask the following question: *What is the relationship between individual
and collective transformative learning, and what practices observed in the Ecology of Leadership program best support transformation? I examine this question through the lens of the case study of the Ecology of Leadership program at the Regenerative Design Institute, which I introduce in the next chapter.
CHAPTER TWO: A WAY OF REMEMBERING

In this chapter, I introduce the case study of the Ecology of Leadership program at the Regenerative Design Institute, and the rationale for how I came to select it as my research site. I define a Relational theory of methodology, drawing upon Indigenous and ecological approach principles of relationship, reconnection, responsibility, and reciprocity, and locate myself in the research. I present my research design; a four-stage mixed-methods approach incorporating observation, participation, tracking (through interviews, sharing circles, surveys, and arts-based inquiry), and reciprocity/contribution, and discuss its implementation. I also provide insight into my experience of conducting the research in a participatory and collaborative format over the past two and a half years, and introduce the idea of “Regenerative Research” as a key finding of this dissertation.

Case Study

Regenerative Design Institute

The Regenerative Design Institute (RDI) evolved out of the Permaculture Institute of Northern California (PINC), when PINC founders James Stark and Penny Livingston-Stark were offered the opportunity to develop Commonweal Garden—a beautiful 17 acre site in Bolinas, California—into a leading edge regenerative design demonstration and education center. RDI was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 2003, and now offers a diversity of programming to hundreds of students each year, including courses on permaculture design, medicinal plants, reskilling, and the Ecology of Leadership. Headquartered within the Point Reyes National Seashore, the physical home of RDI
embodies much of what is taught there: natural buildings, a lush diversity of plants and animal life, extensive gardens and fruit orchards, water retention systems, large scale composting, fish ponds, bee-keeping, and medicinal plant harvesting. A relatively simple site in terms of infrastructure, it blends in with the landscape of the surrounding park where it makes its home—its magic amplified by the presence of the Pacific Ocean just across the meadow.

**Rationale**

The rationale for the selection of RDI as a case site can be explained on one level as a simple matter of resonance and alignment, but from a more rational research perspective, RDI was chosen for its unique approach to education for the Great Turning, which centers on using nature-based experiences to help individuals rediscover their connection to their own inner selves, to the earth, and to one another. Specific reasons for my selection of RDI as a case study included:

1. RDI integrates three core aspects of transformation that I was interested in exploring: personal transformation or “inner gardening,” nature-based learning for earth regeneration, and “community” leadership and transformation. By looking deeply within this organization, I hoped to be able to track questions of transformation on several levels, examining how RDI’s pedagogical approaches are impacting transformation on inner, outer, and community levels.

2. RDI is at the leading edge of innovation in its work on permaculture as well as in the integration of nature-awareness, regenerative design and transformational leadership development.
3. RDI is still at an emergent stage. It is not yet well known outside of particular circles and no major studies have been conducted to date of its work.

4. RDI’s graduates are already going on to achieve notable effects in their communities, such as establishing the first Fair Trade program for the City of Berkeley and becoming the sustainability director for Disney Corporation. However, these results have not yet been tracked and formally evaluated.

5. Although RDI is a small organization, it is well connected to several other branches of the social/ecological movement (e.g. Transition Town movement, Gaia University, Bioneers, Earth Activist Training, Indigenous communities).

The Ecology of Leadership

Within the Regenerative Design Institute’s portfolio of offerings, the Ecology of Leadership is considered their “inner permaculture” program. Whereas a majority of RDI’s other programs focus on hands-on, practical skill development, the Ecology of Leadership directs its attention more on personal development, deep nature connection, and interpersonal group work. Although I initially considered participating in and tracking a number of RDI’s programs, as well as mapping RDI’s role in the Great Turning movement, I determined that it would not be feasible within the scope of the PhD to do so. I made the determination to participate as time allowed in a variety of RDI’s programs in order to gain a full perspective on the organization’s work and mission, but to focus the dissertation exclusively on the Ecology of Leadership program, as it has the most explicit framework for examining the connection between inner and outer transformation as well as the connection between individual transformation and
collective change.

The Ecology of Leadership program was born in 2005 out of the collaboration of James Stark and Christopher Kuntzsch, who met through the Northern California nature awareness community. Their partnership brought together James’ extensive background in permaculture, nature awareness, community development, and spiritual psychology with Christopher’s experience in biological field work, nature awareness, leadership development, business consulting, and personal coaching and counseling. The course is a five-month program, with an intensive in-person weekend session once per month, supplemented by assignments and various systems of accountability and support for the application of the material between the weekends. The course has now completed fourteen circles, twelve on site at Commonweal Garden in Bolinas, and two in Southern California in the Santa Barbara area, in addition to a number of shorter one or two-day programs. The longer term circles have been labeled with consecutive numbering as follows: EOL-1 through EOL-12 for the circles held on site at RDI in Bolinas, and SB-1 and SB-2 designating the two southern California programs; note that I will refer to the different EOL circles by this numbering format throughout the dissertation. Details about the outline, form, and content of the course will be shared at a later point.

Ecology of Leadership Program Participants

Each Ecology of Leadership course has an average of 25–30 participants—with earlier circles including as little as 12 participants and the last two circles (EOL-11 and EOL-12) coming closer to 40. The majority of participants tend to be in the 25–50 age range, but participants have ranged from 20–78 years old. They come primarily from the
San Francisco Bay Area but also include occasional commuters from locations including Canada, Arizona, Colorado, and Southern California. Their professional backgrounds range widely, including artists, environmental activists, farmers, lawyers, corporate executives, non-profit leaders, stay at home parents, social justice activists, nurses, doctors, teachers, principals, fashion designers, realtors, musicians, and neuroscientists.

Ethnically, the majority of participants have been Caucasian, a statistic which is representative of the local population of West Marin where the program is housed—although participants have also come from Native American, Latino, Asian, African-American, Indian, Middle Eastern, and a variety of international (born and raised outside of North America) backgrounds, and the program has been increasing its outreach strategy and focus on diversity and inclusivity in recent years. The gender balance has also been heavily skewed throughout the program’s history—with a majority female participants, particularly in the program’s early years—a statistic that also reflects that of similar programming and circles in the education, service, social justice, environmental and transformative learning sectors. However, this has been steadily changing—whereas early circles had a vast majority of female participants, the balance has been closer to 2:1 male/female in the past two circles (EOL-11 and EOL-12).

It should be noted that many of the participants come from a place of relative privilege, in particular in the context of the global community. My decision to focus on this kind of more privileged context as the site of studying transformation in the Great Turning was an intentional decision. After many years of working in international development and volunteering overseas in communities in the Global South, I decided that I wanted to shift my focus to working on transformation here in North America, with
individuals whose actions influence so much of the global context. It is true that the Ecology of Leadership is working with a primarily white population of a relatively privileged background—although this is not the intention of the program, it reflects the local population of Marin county where it is housed. This is also true for many of the circles of the “Great Turning” work that are happening in places like Northern California. Although I am myself uncomfortable with circles that are “mostly white,” having come from a background of facilitating and studying interracial dialogue groups for my master’s and also having worked primarily in Indigenous communities around the world, I also see this an opportunity. Transformation needs to happen within these contexts. At the same time, as I will discuss in the conclusion, there is an opportunity to both work towards making programs like EOL as diverse as possible so that all can benefit, as well as to consider whether this transformative process can be applied to working directly in more diverse communities.

In the first data chapter, “Arriving at the Garden Gates,” I will explore the common themes that draw individuals to participate in the program. This quick sketch of the overall participant make-up of the Ecology of Leadership program provides a snapshot of the composition of the circles that should prove helpful for understanding my participant selection process. The participants in the research project reflect the diversity and make-up of the circles, as described above.

**A Relational Paradigm for Research**

Once I had determined my case study, I began to consider the methodological approach that would shape the research process. Rather than following an existing
methodology, I chose to define my own. The definition of a unique research methodology is a choice to both disrupt and challenge the existing definitions of research as well as to make a potential contribution to scholarly inquiry. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Patti Lather’s chart of Postpositivist Inquiry (1991) sets out various critiques of positivist science (e.g. post-modern, emancipatory, etc.), but “significantly absent are the organic and indigenous approaches to research” (p. 167). Smith purports that most post-positivist approaches are regarded as deriving from a Freirian pedagogy, and are therefore framed as relatively recent; however, this denies the possibility that alternative research frameworks could pre-date positivism and therefore also precede “post-modern” approaches such as “participatory-action” research.

Four Arrows (2008) speaks to the possibility for students to define their own methodologies in his work *The Authentic Dissertation*. He describes the dissertations represented in that text, which depart from the “traditional” academic dissertation, as “spiritual undertakings and reflections that honor the centrality of the researcher’s voice, experience, creativity, and authority” (p. 1). This dissertation reflects this approach, in the sense that I have centralized my own voice, experience, creativity, and authority, while drawing upon existing paradigms and practices of research. Four Arrows states that the authors in that text “recognize how tapping into more diverse perspectives, more authentic experience and reflection, and more creative abilities” (p. 1) may enable them to more directly address the most significant problems of our time. He also honors the fact that students are drawing upon multiple methodologies, and names the various threads woven together by the students as he introduces their work each chapter.

In this spirit, my methodology draws upon multiple existing theories and
methodologies. I arrived at this research paradigm primarily through an investigation of the literature on Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous methodologies (e.g. Brant-Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 2000; Madjidi and Restoule, 2008; Smith, 1999; Brown & Strega, 2005; Nelson, 2008; Wilson, 2001, 2008; Ellis & Earley, 2006; Kovach, M., 2005; Loppie, 2007; Four Arrows, 2008; Nabigon, Hagey, Webster, & Mackay, 1999) and on ecological worldviews and permaculture/natural systems design (e.g. Berry, 1988; Capra, 1996; Abrams, 1996; Mollison, 1988; Holmgren, 2002; Livingston-Stark, 2012).

My research approach also has natural overlap with and incorporates aspects of several other strands of qualitative research methodologies, including community-based, participatory action research, feminist, appreciative inquiry, and arts-based methodologies (e.g. Barndt, 2001, 2006, 2011; Cole & Knowles, 2008; Lavallée, 2007, 2009; Maguire, 1987; Miles, 2002; McNiff, 1998; Park, 1993; Wang, Yuan & Feng, 1996). And in essence, it adopts an intuitive and emergent approach, which implies an ability to adapt and become present to the needs of the current time, as discussed by scholars such as Peter Senge et. al (2005).

Drawing upon these sources, and my own knowing, I defined my approach a relational methodology, as relationship is the most central value at the heart of this approach. This approach makes sense given the overall framing of my dissertation, regarding humanity’s needs for reconnection and transformation within the context of a global ecological crisis. It was also selected because my personal worldviews and scholarly background have been deeply informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, and since an ecological, natural design-based epistemology is both appropriate for and defines the work of the case study site. The choice to frame my methodology from an
indigenous-ecological standpoint is therefore an explicit choice to centralize worldviews and methods that come not from a Western intellectual paradigm, but rather from ancient, earth-based ways of knowing and that arise from organic, indigenous, natural, ecological, and intuitive standpoints.

Core principles that form the foundation for my definition of a relational methodology include:

- Knowledge is grounded in a particular location, community and natural ecosystem
- Learning happens through observation, participation, intuition, and mentoring
- Centrality of relationships and connections within a community or eco-system
- Allowing for the organic, natural unfolding of processes and discovery
- Centralizing recovery, healing and regeneration in natural and human systems
- Honoring diversity and individual stories of the diverse members of an eco-system, as well as the collective story they come together to uniquely tell
- Respect for all members of the community and ecosystem
- Responsibility to care for the land, for the community of which we are a part, and for the knowledge and traditions that are entrusted to us
- Reciprocity (law of return)—giving back to the community and the ecosystem
- Regeneration—that the research itself aim to be life-giving and contribute to the healing, transformation, and regeneration of the researcher, the community of research, and the whole system

**All My Relations**

Central to this approach is the understanding that all things are located in a particular context (ecosystem, community, etc.) and within that context hold meaning in relationship to one another. From the Lakota Sioux tradition, this principle of relationship is known as *Mitakuye Oyasin*, or “All My Relations,” which speaks to the understanding that relationship is not defined as only our human or blood relations but as our living relationships with all beings in Creation, including mineral, plant, and animal life. As described by Simpson (2000), and cited by Hart (2010) in the Anishinaabe worldview, “Knowledge is holistic, cyclic, and dependent upon relationships and connections to
living and non-living beings and entities” (p. 3). Thomas L. Crofoot Graham (2002) speaks of a “relational worldview” that is central to American Indian societies.

As applied to a methodological and epistemological framework, this principle of relationship speaks to both my role as a researcher in relation to the community being researched, as well as to the way the research is designed. It has been defined from a Maori perspective as whanaungatanga, or “the process of establishing meaningful, reciprocal and familial relationships through culturally appropriate ways, establishing connectedness and engagement and therefore a deeper commitment to other people.” (Bishop, 1999). In my research, I aimed to establish meaningful connections and relationships with the community, organization, and ecosystem that I am researching, which may carry beyond the scope of the research into potentially “life-long” relationships and commitments (Smith, G.H., 2003).

**Reciprocity**

The adoption of this framework requires that I place the “interests, knowledge, and experience” of the community as central to my research (Rigney, 1999, p. 19). As in community-based research, the community is consulted at each stage of the research (design, inquiry, analysis, and presentation) to ensure that it meets their needs, is accurately valuing and representing community members’ knowledge and experience, and is holding true to the principle of reciprocity. Brian Rice (2005) describes this: “As we receive from others, we must also offer to others” and Michael Anthony Hart (2010) writes that “Reciprocity reflects the relational worldview” (p. 7), and referring to Maggie Kovach (2005), “There is a sense of commitment to the people in many Indigenous
societies. Inherent in this commitment to the people is the understanding of the reciprocity of life and accountability to one another” (p. 9).

Hart (2010) also refers to Shawn Wilson (2001), a leader scholar in the area of Indigenous methodologies, saying: “An Indigenous methodology implies talking about relational accountability, meaning that the researcher is fulfilling his or her relationship with the world around him or her. It requires researchers to be accountable to “all my relations” (p. 9). In Wilson’s words (2001):

An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge . . . [hence] you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research. (p. 177)

La Donna Harris and Jacqueline Wasilewski (2004) also emphasize the value of reciprocity in a relational paradigm, stating:

Reciprocity is the cyclical obligation. It under-scores the fact that in nature things are circular: for example, the cycle of the seasons and the cycle of life, as well as the dynamics between any two entities in relationship with each other. Once we have encountered another, we are in relationship with them...The Indigenous idea of reciprocity is based on very long relational dynamics in which we are all seen as ‘kin’ to each other. (p. 5)

In the context of this research project, reciprocity has meant an on-going process of simultaneous giving and receiving, in which there has been a constant flow of exchange of contributions between the research community and myself.

**Regeneration and Reconnection**

From an ecological perspective, a relational methodology means that the research is conducted from a whole systems approach, in which I both observe and interact as a
member with the ecosystem in an attempt to investigate my research questions. My analysis further prioritizes looking for relationships and connections within the local ecosystem as well as to the broader societal and global ecosystems. This approach naturally connects the local to the global, and therefore also provides the appropriate frame for investigating the links between EOL, RDI and the wider Great Turning as a movement. It also entails aspects of responsibility and regeneration—that the research itself be regenerative and of benefit to the ecosystems of which I am a part. Regenerative research implies that the research itself contribute to the healing, wholeness, and integrity of the system. I elaborate further on the concept of regenerative research at the end of this chapter.

**Cultural Responsibility and Appropriation**

Given that I am adopting a methodology that is in part sourced from my understanding of and others’ definitions of Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, it is important to speak to the potential danger for cultural appropriation. Although I have been told that I have Native American background, I want to make it explicit that I was not raised in a traditional Native way. I only learned about my own heritage after my mother and grandparents on that side of the family had passed on, and I am still seeking to learn about those ancestral roots. Nevertheless, Indigenous worldviews inform my knowing, both intuitively and also through my experience working with many Indigenous communities around the world and being mentored by Elders from various traditions. As such it is important to me to include them explicitly as they are part of the worldview I carry and value.
For me, defining a relational methodology does not mean adopting frameworks that are specific to a particular Indigenous First Nation that would be imported and therefore not appropriate for the research context. Rather, it refers to a broader definition of Indigenous (Collins English Dictionary), and implies that all people have the possibility to access organic, ecological, earth-based, and intuitive ways of knowing. It means that the research should be sourced from the knowledge of the local community and culture which one in researching. In my experience, the concept of relationship is a central value for traditional cultures from many directions, including positivist science, as will be described later this dissertation, and as such is the core organizing principle for my research approach.

When I was co-authoring a chapter on Comparative Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Learning with Jean-Paul Restoule (Mundy et al., 2008), we discussed the question that arose from teachers, both Indigenous and not, of “Do I have the right to teach from Aboriginal cultural worldviews and perspectives?” We responded that an Aboriginal Studies scholar at University of Toronto had advised a reframing of the question to ask, “What is our responsibility?” As we stated in that text,

At a time of spiritual, ecological, and social crisis, the opportunity exists to turn toward Aboriginal holistic frameworks for knowing and learning which will help humanity to develop a sense of respect and relationship with all Creation. In this age of rapid globalization and increased interaction and interdependence across cultures, the need to take into consideration Indigenous ways of knowing and learning has never been more relevant. (p. 33)

For me this question of “what is our responsibility?” applies also to practices adopted in the Ecology of Leadership program which might be seen as sourced from Indigenous teachings. In my assessment, there are not many practices used in the program which I would interpret as directly “Indigenous”—rather, there are practices
used, such as the format of a circle, the practice of gratitude, practices of deep nature connection, the concept of returning to the village, etc. which I see as rooted in many diverse traditions around the world, including in Indigenous communities. This speaks again to a more broadly “Indigenous” or perhaps “human” way of being that is sourced in deep remembrance our relationship with ourselves, one another, and the land. However, I invite an open discussion of this and welcome any concerns from scholars who read this text with a concern for cultural appropriation. As I have learned from my own Native Elders, it is always good to offer an apology for any harm that unknowingly has been caused, to any person or being, by our actions. I approach this dissertation with this humility.

Research Design, Interpretation, and Analysis

The design for this study was based on two core operational structures. As an overarching framework, I envisioned four major stages of the research—observation, participation, tracking/inquiry, and contribution. Second, within the tracking/inquiry component of this framework, I employed a mixed-methods approach, which had as a core intention to engage a series of diverse qualitative and quantitative methods that would together provide a holistic response to the research question. The following sections describe the core components of my research design.

A Fourfold Design: Observation/Coming into Relationship, Participation, Tracking/Inquiry and Reciprocity/Contribution

The four overarching stages of the research design were as follows:
1. Observation/Coming into relationship.
   a. Building relationships with members of the RDI community and with the natural ecosystem at RDI. This is not a fixed-time activity, but an ongoing process that continued throughout the research and is expected to be an enduring, potentially “life-long” (G.H. Smith, 2003) component.
   b. Quiet and long-term observation of the natural ecosystem at RDI, the cultural ecosystem of the organization, the various programs and their participants, the branches to the wider movement, and the connections between them.
   c. Tracking for this method includes journaling and the use of arts-based documentation.

2. Participation
   a. Participation in the Ecology of Leadership and other programs of RDI.
   b. Actively taking part in the community as much as possible.
   c. Tracking my own learning and experiences through journaling and arts-based documentation.

3. Tracking/Inquiry
   a. Explicit inquiry into my core question as well as specific questions and areas outlined in collaboration with RDI.
   b. In-depth interviews with participants, graduates, instructors, and community-members.
   c. Sharing circles.
   d. Surveys and the use of mixed-method data collection and analysis.
   e. Arts and symbol-based methods (collection of participants’ visual representations of their journey and learning process).

4. Reciprocity/Contribution.
   a. Collection of data on RDI’s programs and participants which could be used to support funding applications, promotions, website, etc.
   b. Potential to use data to support publication of a book(s) on RDI.
   c. Using the research to identify EOL/ RDI’s “growing edges” and to imagine/envision possibilities for RDI’s further unfoldment, as well as to potentially participate in and contribute to those developments.
   d. Active participation in the community and helping to meet its needs as they arise throughout the research.
   e. Helping consider how to develop a scalable model for RDI’s work.

Mixed-Methods Approach

Within this overarching four-stage structure, I employed a mixed-methods holistic/dialectical design, integrating qualitative, quantitative, and arts-based methods.
As described by Jennifer Greene, Valerie Caracelli, and Wendy Graham (1989), mixed-methods designs combine quantitative and qualitative methods to measure overlapping but differing facets of a phenomenon, allowing for broader content coverage and the enrichment of understanding. Validity can also be increased by comparing constructs and by clarifying and confirming information from one part of the study to another. The different methods therefore help enhance the rigor and scope of the research by approaching the same kinds of questions from different methodological approaches and perspectives, thereby creating triangulation. My intention was that the findings would also be presented holistically, integrating the various methods and forms of data to tell the story of transformation of the participants in the Ecology of Leadership program by representing it in multiple forms.

The primary methods that I intended to utilize were as follows: 1) Participant Observation, 2) Interviews, 3) An “Ecological Leadership Assessment” Survey, 4) Arts-based Transformative Learning Story Mapping, 5) Story/Sharing Circles, and 6) Alumni Survey. These methods and the story of their implementation will be discussed in the next section.

**Implementation of the Research Design**

The summary of the implementation of the research design over the past 2.5 years is represented in Table 2.1. In the following pages, I provide an account of each of the stages of the research implementation, including a detailed explanation of the methods used for the tracking (data collection) and the reasons that some of the methods became more central than others to the data that is presented in this dissertation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Research Activity</th>
<th>Dissertation components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010-10</td>
<td>First came into contact with RDI/EOL at Bioneers</td>
<td>Identification of research site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First meetings at RDI</td>
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<td>2010-11</td>
<td>2nd meeting with RDI</td>
<td>Confirmation of collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010-11 to 2011-02</td>
<td>Ongoing phone and Skype meetings with EOL Directors to plan research</td>
<td>Proposal and Ethics Protocol</td>
</tr>
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<td>2011-02 to 2011-06</td>
<td>Participated in EOL-8 circle</td>
<td>Data Collection—Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-02 to 2011-04</td>
<td>Development of 360 Survey; Administration of survey, collection of data</td>
<td>Data Collection—360 Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-04</td>
<td>Pilot interviews with 3 current EOL participants</td>
<td>Data Collection—Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-08</td>
<td>EOL Alumni Convergence, 2 audio-recorded sharing circles with 8 participants</td>
<td>Data Collection—Sharing Circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-10 to 2011-02</td>
<td>EOL-9 circle; participated as an alumni facilitation team member</td>
<td>Data Collection—Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-10 to 2011-12</td>
<td>Revision of 360 survey; administration of second phase of survey to EOL-9</td>
<td>Data Collection—Survey</td>
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<td>2011-02 to 2011-04</td>
<td>In-depth interviews with alumni participants (20)</td>
<td>Data Collection—Interviews</td>
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<td>2012-10 to 2013-04</td>
<td>Data Transcription &amp; Analysis</td>
<td>Transcription &amp; Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-02 to 2012-07</td>
<td>EOL-10 circle; participated as a core instructor</td>
<td>Observation/ Participation/ Contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-02 to present</td>
<td>Regular consultative meetings with James and CMK</td>
<td>Observation/ Participation/ Contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-02 to 2013-08</td>
<td>Collection of arts-based data (e.g. life story maps, creative scenes, photos, life wheels) through email requests to participants, use of program images, and use of own images and arts-based data</td>
<td>Data Collection—Arts-based</td>
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<td>2012-05</td>
<td>Adaption of Interview questions and 360 survey to create an alumni survey (not administered)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012-11 to 2013-03</td>
<td>EOL-11 circle; participated as a core instructor</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-03 to 2013-08</td>
<td>EOL-12 circle; participated as a core instructor</td>
<td>Observation/ Participation/ Contribution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Stage One: Observation/Coming into Relationship**

As intended, the first four months were dedicated to “coming into relationship” and observing the organization through regular phone and Skype consultations with the directors, while working remotely from Canada. Through that process, I determined that the research study would be focused specifically on the Ecology of Leadership Program. The participant-observation stage is an ongoing process, as my involvement with the Ecology of Leadership continues to inform my analysis and interpretation in the telling of this story.

**Stage Two: Participation**

In February 2011, true to my relational design, I enrolled in the Ecology of Leadership in the EOL-8 program from February–June 2011. My participation has continued throughout the two and a half years of the study, in a variety of iterations—at the August 2011 EOL Convergence, as a member of the alumni facilitation team from October 2011–February 2012, and then as a core instructor for the EOL program from February 2012 to the present. I also participated in a variety of other RDI programs over the past 2.5 years, including Bird Language, 4 Seasons Permaculture Design, the Art of Mentoring, and as a coordinator for RDI’s Intercultural and Intergenerational Peacemakers Gatherings. Although I was not collecting data on those programs, my participation gave me a holistic perspective on the work of RDI and enhanced my relationships within the greater community in a way that informs this dissertation.
Stage Three: Tracking/Inquiry

In February 2011, concurrent with my first EOL circle, I began to work with the EOL program directors to develop measures to track and collect data on the other participants of the program. The methods intended for use, as described above, were: 1) Participant Observation, 2) Interviews, 3) An “Ecological Leadership Assessment” Survey, 4) Arts-based Transformative Learning Story Mapping, 5) Sharing Circles, and 6) Alumni Survey. In the follow sections I describe each of these methods, with an emphasis on the interviews as this became the most effective means for data collection.

Arts-based Transformative Learning Story Mapping/Arts-based Methods

One of my goals for this dissertation was to collect arts-based data that would help to tell the story in a more visual and creative way. I collected participants’ own organic representations of their EOL learning; for example life story maps, their creative scenes, the tree model, images of sit spots, etc. The arts-based data in this dissertation is complementary to the primary data collected, and used to illustrate the various practices and learning described textually. The arts-based data is also included to provide a visual way of understanding the EOL journey, which as art has the possibility to elicit a different way of knowing, and more visceral or even felt responses through the use of images.

Sharing Circles

The sharing circles were envisioned as a means to collect data through a dialogical format, by encouraging participants to participate in a circle in which they
would share their experience in the Ecology of Leadership. My inspiration for trying this method came from my experience using a “talking circle” format in my work with Indigenous communities. The sharing circle is based on a collaborative and Indigenous model of research, and is therefore closely aligned with a relational approach. Members of the sharing circle come together voluntarily and with the collective intention of hearing one another’s stories and sharing their own. Additional reasons for utilizing sharing circles for social research may include creating the conditions for truth speaking, building relationship, healing, collaboration, and learning, in a way that is sourced in Indigenous traditional practices for communication (Restoule, 2004; Hart, 1996; Fitznor, 2002).

We implemented this method at the EOL Convergence in August 2011, a weekend gathering open to all EOL alumni, to capture a dialogue between participants from different years of the program. Out of 12 participants at the gathering, 8 volunteered to take part in recorded sharing circles about their experience. The circles were not facilitated—the participants were given some general guiding questions and a time frame and then were left to their own conversations, which were recorded. In both circles, each individual shared some of their story of transformation through the Ecology of Leadership, and then reflections and dialogue ensued.

In both circles, there were gems that emerged regarding what had been transformative for individuals through the program. However, the greatest value for the sharing circles was for offering a glimpse of the “collective” aspect of the Ecology of Leadership program. The resulting conversations after each individual’s share reflected mutual learning, reflection, and healing and a demonstration of vulnerability and
authenticity in a way that is a microcosm of the group process that happens in the EOL journey. The sharing circle format also provided a powerful forum for building relationships and connection, and for transformation and healing to occur (Hart, 1996; Restoule, 2004). As I was not able to record the Ecology of Leadership group process as it was happening mid-program, the sharing circles provided a poignant glimpse into the quality of sharing that happens in the program itself.

*Mixed Quantitative and Qualitative “360° Ecological Leadership Assessment” Survey*

One of the first data collection methods developed and implemented, beginning in February 2011, was a 360° mixed-methods “Ecological Leadership Assessment” survey (see Appendix Three for one version of this survey). The intention was to develop a survey that would serve three purposes: 1) to benefit EOL program participants by helping them assess and track their own growth and development through the program, 2) to inform my research study, and 3) to help tell the story of the Ecology of Leadership to the wider public. Ten primary categories of ecological leadership were defined, representing the core areas of competence that the Ecology of Leadership program intended to cultivate, which were to be assessed quantitatively and qualitatively. The survey was designed to have both a self-assessment component for the participants to complete, and an almost identical survey that the participants would each send to a diversity of people in their networks so that they could compare their self-perception with how they were seen by others. The concept of receiving “feedback” from the landscape is a core permaculture principle.

Hundreds of hours went into the development and administration of the survey,
and a rich set of quantitative and qualitative data was collected from a total of 409 individuals over the course of three different stages of implementation. An entire dissertation could be written exclusively on the implementation and results from that survey alone, however, surprisingly the 360° survey data did not end up being central to the findings presented in this dissertation for telling the story of the Ecology of Leadership. Many participants received significant value from it, myself included, as will be described in the conclusion. However, it did not achieve its intended goal of being a means to concretely measure participants’ growth and development from start to end of the program. It was most useful for participants to get a snapshot of where they were at and how others saw them upon entering the program—it did not, however, prove effective in tracking change. We learned that to repeat the survey at the end of the five-month program was too soon to be able to measure growth, and re-administering later resulted in very few responses; therefore it was not relevant for being able to tell the story of transformation for this dissertation.

For me as a researcher, it was an interesting process of learning to develop and administer a mixed-methods survey with quantitative measures, yet confirmed my strong preference for qualitative measures. More importantly, it became clear that the very act of attempting to quantify, assess, and measure participants’ growth and development was at odds with EOL’s core values and mission to support participants to grow and transform while at the same time as learning to love and accept themselves exactly as they are. Thus I will not be relying on that data for the core of this dissertation.
In-depth Interviews

The research design included a plan for in-depth interviews with three categories of participants: 1) the founders and Co-Directors of RDI and EOL, 2) current participants in the Ecology of Leadership, and 3) alumni graduates of the program. I began with three pilot interviews with current participants of the EOL-8 program in April 2011. As I set up those interviews, concerns were expressed by the program directors that the interviews could take the participants into an analytical or critical mindset about the program. They felt that to ask the participants to reflect on what they were learning mid-program could take them out of their learning process and be detrimental. I did not necessarily agree with this strategy, and we decided to go ahead with the pilot interviews as a test. However, what I found was that it was indeed challenging for participants to speak to their experience and what was transforming for them, as they were mid-process. Participants mostly discussed their life history and what had brought them to EOL, and had less clarity about what was changing for them through the program. As a result, I adjusted my strategy after those initial interviews to focus on alumni, the majority of whom were at least six months post-graduation, who could provide perspective on how EOL had been transformative for them after having completed the program.

The selection approach for alumni participants was a purposive sampling approach (Patton, 1990). James, Christopher and I reviewed the roster of all graduates of the Ecology of Leadership program and selected an initial list of potential interviewees who reflected a representative sample of the EOL alumni population. This included a spread across the various circles of EOL, ranging from EOL-1 through to EOL-9, the last circle from which alumni data was collected. Participants were also selected to reflect the
gender balance present over the course of EOL’s history, or roughly a 3:1 female/male ratio, and to include a diverse representation of the participants’ professional backgrounds, ethnicity, and age range.

Before contacting our list of potential interviewees, we decided to again do three pilot interviews. At this point in the process, it was also determined that James and/or Christopher would participate in some of the interviews in a co-interviewer role with me. This decision represented our collaborative and relational approach—it was determined that some of the participants, especially those from earlier circles with whom I did not have an existing relationship, would potentially share more deeply if James or Christopher were present. As it could have also been possible that the Co-Directors’ presence could have impeded the participants’ sharing, we included a question about this in our debrief with the participants after the pilot interviews. Christopher and I interviewed all three of the pilot interview participants together. Each interview lasted 1.5–2 hours and was held in person. The pilots assisted us to develop a format in which we began each interview with a brief 5-minute meditation, a gratitude circle, and sharing intentions. Through the pilots we also refined the questioning sequence to be used for the remainder of the interviews. All three participants reflected that it was positive to have Christopher present, but not necessary, which led to our strategy of having James or Christopher present when possible, but not making it a required component to have one of them with me.

Based on the success of the pilots, we then invited roughly 40 individuals to participate as part of our first reach-out, and roughly 30 responded. The first set were scheduled and a total of 20 interviews were held over the course of two months, some in
person and some via Skype, all ranging from 1.5–2 hours in length. The one exception to this regards participants who were in the EOL-9 circle. Early on in the interview process, we decided to try interviewing participants as they were exiting the course as another pilot. All participants in the EOL-9 circle were invited to take part in an interview on the final morning of the course; 5 individuals volunteered (Anna, Deborah, Elyse, Nalini, and Tara), and participated in more streamlined interviews, ranging from 30–45 minutes each. Those interviews were conducted on the final day of that program, following their graduation the night before, on site at RDI. However, these participants did not have the benefit of the retrospective view, and, as identified in the initial pilots, it was again confirmed that to maximize the benefit it was preferable to interview participants at least six months after completion of the program. Although those participants’ data is represented in the dissertation, they had less to share than the other interviewees and therefore are less prominent in the story.

In total, Christopher (CMK) and/or James were present for 12 of the 20 alumni interviews, with a break-down of Katia & CMK (4), Katia & James (3), and Katia, CMK and James (5)—the remainder I conducted on my own. Although each combination of interviewers had its own particular flavor, and different “off-script” questions were occasionally asked, the overall quality of the data and the interview experience appears to be consistent across all of the interviews. The use of a consistent starting format of a 5-minute meditation, a gratitude circle, and intention setting in each interview especially seemed to create the conditions for a meaningful, heart-connected dialogue, which felt strongly in alignment with my relational methodological approach.

After having conducted 20 interviews with alumni, I sensed that I had reached
data saturation. I therefore made the decision to hold off on scheduling any further interviews until the existing ones had been transcribed and analyzed. That process resulted in a rich data set of more than 400 pages of interview data, and I determined that no further data collection measures were required at that time.

**Stage Four: Contribution**

The contribution stage of this collaborative research project is in full bloom. As discussed above, the contributions of my research relationship with the Regenerative Design Institute began early, with the incorporation of the 360° survey in February 2011, and have since included a variety of innovations and “upgrades” to the program that have resulted directly from the research collaboration. Rather than highlight these here, they will be detailed in the conclusion.

**Research Participants**

The participants for this study thus include: current program participants (3), alumni interviewees (20), participants in the 360 survey (409), sharing circle participants (8), and a number of participants who contributed arts-based data, some of whom were interviewees and others who submitted their images independently in response to an email request. These participants reflect a wide range— for example, the 409 participants in the survey include a broad sampling of EOL participants’ ecologies, including their family members, friends, colleagues, and community stakeholders from across the country and in some cases from other countries. The primary research participants, the interviewees, reflect the diversity of the circle as described above—primarily Caucasian
but including a few people of color, and roughly 3:1 female to male. Their professions represent a wide range, including a biologist, a corporate executive assistant, artists, non-profit leaders, an eco-chaplain, stay at home mothers, a yoga and dance teacher, a corporate sustainability consultant, a computer programmer, students, a waitress, someone working in a technology start-up in Silicon Valley, and a psychologist. Their ages also reflected the range of the circle, from early 20s to someone in her 60s, with the majority in their 30s–50s. The majority live in Bay Area, ranging from Big Sur to Sonoma County, including both urban and rural settings.

To view the list of participants and relevant context and data, please view Table 2.2. Some of these participants overlap, as they were part of multiple rounds of data collection, in which case this is indicated with a number after the name (e.g. 1—first interview, 2—second interview). The vast majority of the participants selected to be self-identified. Two asked to remain anonymous; for these I have used pseudonyms. The participants are all identified by name unless marked with an asterisk (*), in which case a pseudonym has been chosen. Pilot #1 interviews represent the interviews that were conducted with participants mid-program in 2011. Pilot #2 interviews are the ones conducted in the second round by Christopher and myself. The participants’ EOL circles are identified by number, chronologically indicating when they took the program. Worthy of note is that there are more participants from recent years, perhaps indicating that those participants are more involved still with the program. The circles were also smaller in the early years of the program, with roughly 12 participants in the first circle, and 40 in the most recent circles, offering a larger pool of participants in recent years. In addition, an interesting note is that several of the interviewees were participants who came back to
EOL in a service capacity on the facilitation team—this is indicated by the number of that circle and the marker FT. The high prevalence of facilitation team members who responded to the call for interviews may indicate a higher level of commitment and dedication to the program. One participant, Susan, returned again as an assistant—this is marked with an A. For the arts-based data, I am name the individuals who sent in their images in response to my email request. I am not including the names of the 407 participants in the survey as this data predominantly is not used in the dissertation; however I am maintaining those records in an online database.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Format</th>
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Data Analysis and Interpretation

Given the depth of my participatory immersion in the Ecology of Leadership, many of the themes that emerged as central to this dissertation arose organically over the course of my involvement. For example, the overall conceptual framing is based upon a combination of core concepts of the Ecology of Leadership curriculum with my own analysis of the program, using a lens of connection to self, nature and other that is informed by my previous work with the Aboriginal organization Ghost River Rediscovery. Interpretation and analysis was also ongoing throughout the interview process, as I documented my learning from those interviews and applied insights taken from the interviews directly to the EOL program development.

When it came time to conduct a textual analysis of the interview transcripts, I first read through all 20 of my transcripts, taking manual notes of emerging themes and core concepts and phrases. I then documented each of these themes into a computer document, analyzed them together, and grouped them under a few major headings, with subheadings, and sub-sub headings. I did not use computer software to identify or sort themes; I used my own analysis together with Microsoft Excel and mind-mapping software. After I had identified the initial themes by extracting them from the interviews, James, Christopher and I conducted part of the second level of data analysis together. We used a few different methods for looking at and organizing the more than 100 themes that were present—including Microsoft Word tables; Excel spreadsheets; printing the themes onto a 6’x8’ foot poster, writing them on sticky notes that we could move around; and inputting the themes into a mind-mapping software program. We used an iterative process of applying the conceptual framework while listening for the emergent themes.
arising from the data, which resulted in a detailed outline with the major themes primarily
defined through the conceptual framework and the subheadings and sub-sub-headings.arising from the data.

Having defined a detailed outline and structure for the dissertation, I then again
read through all of my interview transcripts, sorting them according to the determined
themes. This resulted in another layer of analysis, both of the individual transcripts as
well as the overall structure. Having completed my analysis of roughly one-third of the
transcripts, I realized that the data was telling a slightly different conceptual story.
Whereas my first outline used the “self-nature-village” frame as the major headings, with
“roots and soil” and “canopy” as sub-headings for each chapter, through the data sorting I
realized that the overall framing of the story made more sense with the tree model as the
primary frame, and the “self-nature-village” components as sub-headings. I thus re-
analyzed the first set of interviews according to the new framework, and completed the
remainder of the data interpretation, including the sharing circle data, in this format.
During the writing, this new structure shifted again from eight long chapters to five major
parts with shorter chapters in each section. I used the thesis *Leaping pedagogy: Visionary
storying, collaborative art-making and the lessons of salmon* by Lee Robertson Bensted
(2005) as a model for this design.

**Locating Myself**

I will begin by first describing where I am located as I write this dissertation. I
will then share about how I am located *relationally* within this research project.
Physical Location

As I write, I sit on my deck, and gaze out over the verdant spring hills of Tilden Regional Park. Looking out, more shades of green meet my eyes than I can begin to describe. Giant redwoods, Coast Live Oaks, California Bays, Blue Elderberry, Red Willow, California Buckeye, Madrone, Sycamore, an apple tree, and two varieties of plum trees create the landscape. The yard is full of native plants—wisteria, cow parsnip, coltsfoot, nettles, Iris, many varieties of sage, rosemary, sagebrush, flannel bush, honeysuckle, and much more. The yard is abuzz with bees, and the birdsongs of spring. Anna’s Hummingbirds, Wilson’s Warblers, Orange-crowned Warblers, the Black-headed Grosbeak, Crows, Common Ravens, Red-shouldered Hawks, Turkey Vultures, Mourning Doves, California Towhees, Stellar’s Jays, Scrub Jays, American Robins, and bushtits all call this home. The occasional wild turkey wanders through the yard. A family of deer is just beginning to return home to the area. At night, a bobcat lurks, the coyotes howl in the distance, and the grey fox barks its call, once mistaken by me for a mountain lion.

I take the time to locate myself here, physically, not only because I believe that it
is relevant for the reader to know this, but also because the fact that I find myself in this particular spot is a direct result of this research project on a few levels. First, my express intention in choosing the Ecology of Leadership as my dissertation topic was to ground my research in a lived, real way. To literally put my hands in the dirt, embedding an intensive intellectual process in physical connection to the earth and place. Two years ago, before beginning this dissertation, I would have known very little about the beings with whom I now share this backyard. This growing knowledge results directly from my own budding nature awareness and connection, which has developed through this research. Slowly, I am learning to recognize the birds, to identify the plants, to work with the dirt, to become an intimate contributor and participant in my landscape. On another level, the location in which I find myself is the result of my own engagement in two of the core practices of the Ecology of Leadership journey—the sit spot, and the creative scene—I will share more about my experience of these in later chapters.

I am immensely grateful to be able to ground not only the research but also my writing in this beautiful location. Interviews have taken place here, Ecology of Leadership core team meetings, data sorting and analysis and the vast majority of this writing process. This work is thus not only grounded in this place, but held by it—supported in its very essence by the spiders who weave their webs across this patio table, by the blowing of the wind in the trees, by the birdsong, by the movements of the sun and moon and stars. In the spirit of the Thanksgiving Address, I am profoundly grateful to be generating this story from such a profound sense of connection to the natural landscape—from HOME.
**Relational Research in Practice**

The study has been 100% collaborative with the Regenerative Design Institute and the co-founders of the Ecology of Leadership from the very beginning. James Stark and Christopher Kuntzsch were involved in the design and review of the original research proposal, the ethics protocol, the design and implementation of the methods, and the analysis and coding of the data. Although I have held the primary role in each of those tasks, taking on the bulk of the work and doing all of the writing independently, their consultation and input has been invited and incorporated at every stage of the process.

My own participation in and relationship to the Ecology of Leadership program has been integral to this dissertation and has increasingly deepened over the past three years. I have participated in five EOL programs (EOL-8, 9, 10, 11, and 12), through which time my role has evolved from mere researcher to a participant to a close collaborator and now core instructor of the Ecology of Leadership program. This process has been natural and organic—I began meeting with Christopher and James on a regular basis beginning in November 2010, and quickly was included in the majority of their organizational planning meetings. As soon as February 2011, we were using the research in an interventional and transformative way to inform the development of the EOL program. In the conclusion, I will speak to the influence of the research collaboration on multiple aspects of the program, but in summary my relationship has evolved to a point where for the first time in the program’s history, James and Christopher have welcomed in a third core instructor. In this role, I play a key part in the design and facilitation of the program, and the support of participants as their instructor.

For my data analysis and interpretation and for my own experiences, which are
incorporated in this dissertation, my ongoing involvement with the EOL program continues to inform the findings. This deep participation is an embodiment of my relational design and grounds my analysis and writing grounded in a depth and breadth of experience over the past three years.

**Power and Trust in a Relational Methodology**

Given the potential shift in power dynamics due to my stepping into an instructor position in EOL, it should be noted that all data collection has been with alumni who participated *prior* to my assuming a core instructor role. However, power dynamics exist in all human relationships, and that given my close proximity to the EOL leadership team, it is possible that participants were influenced in their responses by their perception of my position. In addition, the fact that the EOL Co-Directors participated in some of the interviews may have influenced some of the responses, as participants may have wanted to respond positively to the questions in the presence of a beloved mentor.

To counterbalance this question of the potentially negative effects of power dynamics in relational research, I advocate that increased qualities of trust and love become possible through a relational approach. In *Power and Love*, Adam Kahane (2010) addresses how to balance these two forces of power and love toward social good. In this research process, I would argue that the close nature of the relationship, both between myself and the leadership team as well as between the participants and the leadership team, led in fact to greater trust and in turn to a particular quality of authenticity, depth, and vulnerability in participants’ sharing. One could argue that a participant might actually perceive an outsider who takes a more formal approach to the research as having
more power than a trusted mentor or friend. As discussed by Brené Brown (2010), we are more likely to confide our vulnerability in someone whom we feel safe with and can trust. Given the sensitive and very personal nature of participants’ stories, the fact that they have sat in circle with the Co-Directors and in some cases with me as a fellow participant, created a quality of intimacy and trust to then share vulnerable stories. The fact that over 90% of the research participants chose to be self-identified in this dissertation indicates a high level of trust that I feel would not necessarily have been there if they were interviewed by a unknown outsider. Therefore, while acknowledging the potential power dynamics that are present in nearly every human interaction, and while it is impossible to indicate that this dissertation is free of power dynamics, I advocate that a relational approach has the possibility to produce even more authentic and “true” data.

One way that I have attempted to address any unequal power dynamics both in the interview process and in this dissertation is to be equally self-revealing and to treat myself as a subject. I shared my personal perspectives and stories with the participants during interviews (usually after they had completed their interview, so as to not influence their responses), and share more of my own story and vulnerability in this dissertation than any other participant. I have also regularly engaged with the EOL community throughout the process with full vulnerability, sharing both about the research and my personal life, and regularly requesting their witnessing, collaboration, and support. In my experience, this makes me a part of the community rather than an authority—and although I still carry certain power given my position, I also am actively cultivating my own place as an equal part of the circle.
In my own analysis, I found no significant difference in the quality of responses between the interviews that I conducted alone, those with two of us present, and those with all three of us present. However, there was a notable quality of love, familiarity and relationship in those interviews where James and/or Christopher were present which did seem to create increased openness and powerful sharing. This was also true in the cases where I had pre-existing relationships with the participants, such as our having been in the same EOL circle.

**Subjectivity and Critical Analysis**

Another potential concern of a relational methodology to make explicit from the beginning is my own subjectivity within the context of the study. My relationships and connection with both of the program founders and the participants throughout the course of this dissertation, from the initial meeting through to data collection and then analysis and writing, has continually deepened. I acknowledge this depth of relationship, and the resulting subjectivity that may contribute to blind spots in terms of my ability to bring a critical lens to this research.

To address this issue, I approached this question of subjectivity and critical analysis from four perspectives throughout this study. First, my intention with the research from the beginning was that it be a transformative, collaborative process that would contribute to the enhancement of the program. Therefore, I came into the project with and have consciously held throughout a critical lens, from my own participation in the program to my involvement with the program leadership. Through this perspective, I actively brought suggestions for improving and transforming the program forward, and
because of the relationship, they were received in a way that they were immediately responded to and incorporated, or at the very least welcomed and discussed. Examples of this are highlighted throughout the dissertation and in the conclusion, but briefly include: raising questions around the role of the feminine in the leadership of the program, more inclusion of people of color and those of low-income backgrounds, the introduction of the pods, the inclusion of more movement and varied forms of knowing into the program, and increased vulnerability and authenticity within the leadership team itself. Second, I made open space in the interviews for participants to offer any suggestions for the program’s improvement and future directions, and welcomed any critical comments or conversations that arose. Some of these, such as discussions around the inclusion of people of color and the need for the pod structure, led directly to changes in the program. Third, it is important to note that the program itself already collects evaluations from the participants at the end of each program which include a critical reflection of their experience, in which participants are invited to share any suggestions for improvement, challenges that they had in the program, things that they felt were missing, and comments for the facilitators (see Appendix Two). I reviewed these documents and although they are not directly included as data for this dissertation the comments are often reflected in the interviews themselves.

Finally, I wish to make it clear at the outset that my intention with this study was in the spirit of appreciative inquiry. Rather than attempting to analyze whether the EOL program works, and what needs to be improved in it, I was looking for the stories of transformation, of what does work, how it works, and what the consequent results have been. The questions (see Appendix One) therefore focus on this lens. From my
perspective, this does not prohibit a critical perspective—either for myself as the researcher or for the participants—as stated, participants did share suggestions for improvement, and I myself have maintained a consistent commitment to identifying and proactively bringing forward what can be improved in the program. One of the most common comments that the program directors have made regarding our research collaboration is that I have consistently contributed to upgrading and improving the program through my ongoing suggestions and critical analysis. More about these suggestions for change that emerged from the interviews as well as my own analysis of future directions for the program are described in the conclusion.

**Regenerative Research**

I remember one day walking into my research office at the University of Toronto to find my colleague sitting at her desk, looking tired and dejected, staring at her computer and the mountain of documents and books on her desks and data organization sheets on the wall. She had been there in that office day after day, staring at those same documents and computer screen. She had a stack of books that she had recently checked out from the library on finishing the dissertation process, and said to me, “Look at this—it just gets worse.” I asked her, “What gets worse?” She showed me a diagram that looked like a rollercoaster of ups and downs—beginning with a particular mid-point high when someone enters the doctoral program, full of hope and dreams and expectations. The diagram showed how people go through the rollercoaster—up when they finish courses, down when they begin to prep for their comps, up when they pass the comprehensive exam, down when they enter the proposal writing process, etc. . . . but all
increasingly on the “down” trajectory—the highs getting lower and lower, the lows also sinking. The graph showed a spike toward the end when individuals defend their dissertation—but then an even lower dip down when they realize that now that they’re done they can’t really get a job. The book also had chapters on topics such as how dating a PhD student was like being in a relationship with an alcoholic—and actually suggested that there should be support groups for spouses of dissertation students, because the process was not only damaging and depressing for the student, but also for all those around them.

I made a vow in that moment NOT to pursue my dissertation research and production in that way. And there began my inquiry into what I am now calling “Regenerative Research.” The question that I began to carry was: How can I conduct my dissertation in a way that would be actually regenerative—so that rather than being a draining process, that it might actually be life affirming and life giving? In biological terms, regeneration is the process of renewal, restoration, and growth that makes cells, organs, organisms, and ecosystems resilient. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, to regenerate means “formed or created again” or “restored to a better, higher, or more worthy state.” American Heritage Dictionary says to regenerate is “to give new life or energy to; revitalize”; “Restored to a better state; refreshed or renewed.” So, in relation to this research project: how could the process of researching and the writing of the dissertation not only contribute to the regeneration of the community and ecosystem that I am researching, but also be regenerative for me as the researcher—so that upon completion I might feel refreshed, renewed, and revitalized?

As I sit here writing these pages, I am not in a dark office staring at a mountain of
books. I am sitting on my beautiful
deck in northern California,
surrounded by an expansive view
of Tilden Regional Park (already
described, in the section “Locating
Myself.”) The wind is blowing
gently through the trees, the birds
are singing, and the sun is shining. I
feel uplifted and connected to the
natural world. I also write in an
atmosphere of connection to
others—to my left sits a friend who is engaging in his own writing project, our mutual
creative energies helping to urge one another on in achieving our goals. I also feel
connected near and far to a community of individuals who are supporting me—cheering
me on, reading my pages, collaborating in my analysis, invested in the outcome of the
research. On a personal level, I am balancing the writing of the dissertation with regular
and conscious practices that support me in feeling connected to my own self—
meditation, sitting in nature, yoga, prayer, listening to good music. Breaks every 25
minutes to stretch and move my body. Going out dancing at least once a week to release
tension and keep my own creative energies flowing. To me this together is all part of a
regenerative writing and dissertation process—in which I am personally not only able to
sustain myself through the process and “get through it”—but to actually be recreated and
renewed—made better—more alive—at the end.
Conducting regenerative research also means that we are contributing to the regeneration and bettering of the communities in which we are a part. It means that I am present and engaged with my children when they come home from school and spend weekends out in the world with them, having adventures, not touching my computer at all. This is part of a balanced, regenerative system in my experience—for not only do our relationships benefit, I also then have more creativity and energy to bring to my work on Monday morning.

In terms of the research project and community—it also means that the research itself leaves that community in a better state than before the research began. This includes both the process of the way that the research is done as well as the overall impact of the project on the community being research. An example of the way that this has shown up in the dissertation process is that with each interview that I conducted, I shared at the beginning my intention that even the interview itself would be an experience that would leave all of us—the participant and the interviewers—feeling better than when we started, “that this time together can be in itself healing and regenerative and possibly transformative.” (Katia—from interview with Jill, August 1, 2011). And unequivocally, this was the case—as reported by my participants; consistently we each left the interviews feeling uplifted, energized, and more alive.

As an overarching principle, an agenda of Regenerative Research is to regenerate and give back to the community being researched. This means that as a scholarly researcher, I am accountable not only to the university but also to the community. This principle relates to the Indigenous principle of reciprocity—which teaches that we participate in a constant cycle of receiving and giving to those around us and to the
world. Regenerative Research thus intends to leave both the researcher and the researched better at the end of study than they were at the start. This principle takes on additional meaning when considering the rise of movements such as Idle no More, and the potential for scholarship to contribute meaningfully to the regeneration of our communities and planet. In the context of this dissertation, throughout the next chapters I will write about the ways in which this research has contributed to, revitalized, and given new life to the Ecology of Leadership program itself and the members of that community.
CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this dissertation combines two core concepts that together represent an ecological model of transformation. The first provides a frame for examining the relationship between inner and outer transformation, through the metaphor of a tree. The second proposes a framework for understanding transformation through practices of reconnection in four key areas: self, nature, other (village), and world. I overlay these two models to suggest a holistic framework for exploring and cultivating transformative change.

Tree Model

In all spiritual traditions it is taught that everything that manifests in the physical world starts in the invisible realms of spirit…Trees and plants start with a seed that is nurtured in the earth and then expands into roots, branches, leaves, buds, fruits and flowers. Creation comes through us. (Ingerman, 2013, p. 208)

The tree model, drawn directly from the EOL curriculum, is the core conceptual framework I use to describe the relationship between inner and outer transformation. In EOL, the tree model is introduced to explain the connection between the state of being within the individual and their outer reality. Whereas many of the existing change models and leadership development programs focus primarily on strategies for achieving external goals and milestones, EOL uses the tree model framework to propose that beneath the visible world of action, there is an equally important inner reality from which that outward action is sourced. What shows up in the canopy and branches is thus directly related to and a reflection of the root system beneath the surface. In EOL, this is not understood as a unidirectional process, but rather as a dialectical model in which the
inner impacts the outer, the outer simultaneously influences the inner, and meanwhile both are held in a greater ecology which influences the whole system.

The concept that change and transformation happen from the inside out is not a unique concept to the Ecology of Leadership. Sandra Ingerman (2013) writes, “We often expect change just to happen magically without the inner work that is needed to create outer change. . . . But the true changes we are looking for must come from within” (Vaughan-Lee, p. 208). And Kevin Cashman (2008), bestselling author of Leadership from the Inside Out, reinforces this, saying:

Transformation implies a change in the sense of self. There’s both an inner and outer dimension to it. It requires inner work, and an appreciation for how that connects to being in the world, and the outer work of action and service. (p. 19)

The tree is used to represent the individual’s transformative process. The soil its roots are embedded in is the context or environment into which the seeds of change are planted, and in which one is growing and operating. Within the individual, the soil is the emotional body, which in its pure state is love. It can also refer to the overall state of being and consciousness of a family, community, or society in which an individual tree is embedded. The root system is analogous to the individual’s inner thought patterns, beliefs, emotions, and mental models. Often there are roots that extend deep into our past, but there is also a creative opportunity as new roots can constantly be formed. The trunk,
branches, and canopy are all sourced from the root system or “inner garden,” and represent our external expression: our actions or “doing,” the visible structures and manifestations that appear on the surface. Whatever is happening in the canopy fundamentally reflects the quality of our roots and soil and therefore, external change begins with transforming our own inner landscapes. As stated by Cashman (2008),

> We tend to view leadership as an external event. We only see it as something people do. . . . Leadership is not simply something we do. It comes from a deeper reality within us; it comes from our values, principles, life experiences and essence. Leadership is a process, an intimate expression of who we are. It is our whole person in action. (p. 22)

As the core framework for personal transformation, I follow the pattern of the tree as an ecological metaphor in my exploration of individuals’ experiences as participants in the Ecology of Leadership. Part Two, “Entering a Transformative Journey,” discusses the factors that contribute to the preparation of fertile soil and readying of the garden for a transformative journey. In Part Three I go “Into the Roots and Soil,” to examine the inner work of healing and transforming one’s internal state of being, thought patterns, and beliefs. Part Four, “Out to the Canopy,” then illuminates the outer, external work of how individuals present themselves in the world through their action and creativity. As discussed above, this is not meant to indicate that the process of transformation is unidirectional or linear—the engagement of the inner and the outer levels is actually happening simultaneously and are by nature interdependent and integrated. They are only treated as separate here for analytical purposes.

The second framework for transformation to be explored in this dissertation is composed of a combination of practices for reconnection with oneself, with nature, with the village (one another), and with the world. This framework a response to the disconnect disorder described in Chapter One. Given humanity’s alienation and disconnect in each of these areas, a holistic model of transformation aims to reconnect individuals through practices for deep connection with oneself, with the natural world, with one another, and with meaningful engagement in the world. An example representation of this framework is displayed in Figure 3.2.

A Holistic Framework for Transformation

This framework of practices for connection with the self, nature, village, and world is overlaid with the tree to create a comprehensive conceptual model for ecological transformation. This will be demonstrated in the data sections, which combine an
examination of the roots and soil and of the canopy with the role of practices for reconnection in the areas of self, nature, and village. Then in Part Five, I address how this model of transformation leads to participants’ meaningful engagement and finding of purpose in the world. In other contexts this kind of transformation might be termed holistic or integral; however, I am intentionally choosing the term ecological, for reasons that will be seen in the next section.

**Why the “Ecology of Leadership?”**

The name “The Ecology of Leadership” is unique, and merits some definition and explanation before moving forward. In my interpretation, the name carries multiple levels of meaning. I elucidate some of these in this section.

To begin, it is instructive to look at the following definition for ecology:

1. The branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment, including other organisms.
2. The branch of sociology concerned with the spacing and interdependence of people and institutions. (Dictionary.com)

The name thus indicates a model of leadership that inherently takes into account the relationships and interactions between individuals and their environment as well as with one another. It implies that leadership in this time of the Great Turning must shift from a lone-wolf, competitive, hierarchical, and individualistic model to one that is sourced in relationship and connection—that the new leadership must happen both in and through an ecology of relationship. Second, it points to a model of leadership that is sourced in a connection to the natural world, and implies an inherent consideration of the natural environment within the work. Third, it refers to the etymology of ecology—ECO—home, and LOGY—study—the study of our habitations or home. At its core, EOL
is intended to be a homecoming—supporting individuals to return to their most natural state of being, in connection to themselves, one another, and the earth. Fourth, it also refers to the fact that our leadership and our own personal transformation must be supported by an ecology of humans—in other words, be supported by a village—and in turn that our actions and leadership also impact and influence the human ecology around us. The attention to these factors will be described later in the section on the regenerative leadership pattern, in which participants are asked to identify both their stakeholders and supporters as well as those they hope will be influenced by their projects and engagements.

In a time of ecological crisis and increasing awareness of our interdependence, the Ecology of Leadership provides a model for leadership and life that is inherently honoring of, sourced in, and in service to the diverse web of life and relationships of which we are a part. In this context, humans are not only “in nature,” but are nature, as will be demonstrated throughout the dissertation.

Note that I will at times specify “The Ecology of Leadership program,” and in other instances I will write “The Ecology of Leadership” or just “EOL,” both of which are commonly used to refer to the program.

**Definitions of Key Concepts**

Throughout the dissertation, I use terms that are common to the Ecology of Leadership program. For ease of reference, I include here a basic glossary of some of these terms. Some are terminology used in the ecology or permaculture sectors, some in the transformative learning and social movement sectors, and some are unique in their
conceptual application to EOL. The majority of terms are best understood in the context of the program, and as such will be defined in detail as they are introduced throughout the dissertation. If their meaning is not clear here, please note that fuller definitions will follow in subsequent chapters, as is relevant to the presentation of the data.

The definitions included here are not intended to be technical or dictionary definitions. They were generated through a conversation with program director Christopher Kuntzsch, and represent our collective attempt to explain these terms as they are used and intended in the EOL context.

**EOL Glossary of Terms**

- **Baseline**—A system at rest, in its natural, undisturbed, relaxed state. Often referred to in terms of bird language as the state of a landscape when undisturbed by a predator or human. Being out of baseline in that context is indicated by bird alarms, signaling an agitated or excited state of vigilance. Baseline does not mean stillness or no activity—in contrast, it is a state of normal behavior without interference. In reference to humans, it refers to our most natural state when not under stress or threat.

- **Canopy**—Part of the Tree Model—represents the realm of “doing,” or what is externally visible from a person’s way of being. Includes the way that one engages in their relationships, work life, projects, and other kinds of actions and behaviors. Informed by the roots and soil.

- **Creative Scene**—Image, picture, or vision of possibility actualized for different aspects of one’s life, service, world, etc. Sourced in the heart and through guidance, the creative scene becomes the anchor for one’s path and choices.

- **Edge**—In permaculture terms, the edge is the most fertile zone. As applied to EOL, the edge is where learning takes place—where one can expand into new territory and ways of being. The edge is on the periphery of our comfort zone and represents reaching into unknown territory that may be calling one forward into higher expression and actualization. Intersection between the old and familiar ways of being and doing, and the new and emerging possibilities.

- **EOL**—Abbreviation for the Ecology of Leadership—commonly used to refer to the program.
• **EOL-1, 2, 3 etc.**—Numerations that are used to refer to each class of the EOL program.

• **Great Turning**—Era and process of transition from systemic societal structures of industrial growth to life-sustaining new models of cooperation with nature, peace-making, and collaboration among humans, towards a just, thriving, healed world.

• **Inner Permaculture**—The practice of applying permaculture principles and practices to the realm of thoughts, beliefs, mental models, and emotional patterning and structures in human consciousness, development, and behavior.

• **North Star**—A picture or a vision that helps to guide and keep individuals on track towards what is possible for their lives and the world. Directly connected to the creative scenes—the creative scenes together provide the map for the North Star.

• **Permaculture**—Holistic design science that draws on the patterns of nature to inform solutions for food and energy production, structural design, water, etc. that support local self-reliance, ecosystem health, and long-term thrivability.

• **Regenerative**—The quality of healing that supports wholeness and the integrity of a system, a return to the full expression of original intention and instruction.

• **Root system**—In the Tree Model, the root system is the place where our thought patterns, beliefs, and mental models reside. The roots are the analog to the branches in the model—the inner reflection of our doing in the world—and also are the sources for the trunk and the branches and the way we show up in the world.

• **Rumi’s Field**—Derived from Rumi’s famous poem “Beyond right (doing) and wrong (doing) there is a field. . . . I will meet you there,” Rumi’s Field describes a vision of living in non-judgment, non-duality, and a belief that there are no mistakes in the universe. Rumi’s Field presents a possibility for anchoring our inner experience and actions in curiosity, wonder, deep listening, and vision.

• **Sit Spot**—Core routine/practice for deepening nature connection, pattern recognition, and cultivating awareness of the inner and outer realms and the relationship between the two.

• **Soil**—In the Tree Model, it is our emotional body—which in its pure state is love. It can also refer to the overall state of being and consciousness of a family, community, or society in which an individual tree is embedded.
• **Sourcing**—Describes the place from which we make decision, think, and act. Related to the tree model—we source from what we have in the roots. It also describes an active pattern of awareness in which one can practice where he or she is “sourcing” their thoughts and where behaviors are coming from and thereby have more choice and consciousness in their actions.

• **Tracking**—Practice and study of pattern recognition—be it in the natural world (eg. animal trails and sign or larger ecosystem patterns) or in the inner human landscape.

• **Village**—Refers to an archetypal experience of closely interdependent and connected community, such as would have been experienced historically in the “village.” Through the process of EOL, participants are invited to remember themselves as community beings or members of the “village.” Refers to a particular quality of interpersonal relationships that are built upon interdependence and trust, beyond the silos of isolation, one-on-one relationships, and nuclear families.
PART TWO: ENTERING A TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS
The journey into the Ecology of Leadership begins long before participants arrive at the gates of Commonweal Garden. In this chapter, I delve into the literature on transformative learning and rites of passage, which indicates that the individual who undertakes a transformative journey is often initiated by one of two ends of a spectrum of experience. Some are called into the journey by crisis—be it challenges they are facing, unwanted life changes, or an overall sense of disconnection from self, nature, one another, or purpose in the world. Others are called into transformative learning by a sense of vision, hope, or possibility for a different way of being and for reconnection in those same areas. The rich balance of these two contrasting ends of the spectrum, often within the same individual, mirrors the phenomenon of crisis and opportunity described in Chapter One in our global ecology.

I then use this framework to look at the experiences of crisis and possibility that draw individuals into participating in the Ecology of Leadership. First, I examine particular aspects of challenge within each of the four areas of disconnection—self, nature, village and world—which drew people into participating. For example, within the category of village, I discuss experiences of disconnect within families, romantic partnerships, and community that brought participants to a place of search and readiness for transformation. I also examine experiences of breakdown around leadership. I then look at these same four categories of self, nature, village, and world, but from the perspective of a clear calling or possibility for a new way of being. Combining these two
aspects, this chapter tells the story of why individuals choose to participate in the Ecology of Leadership as a transformative learning experience.

**Entering a Journey of Transformative Learning**

Before examining the ways that participants in the Ecology of Leadership are called into that program, I will first review some of the primary theories of transformative learning to examine the literatures within which my research is situated.

**Foundations of Transformative Learning**

The origins of transformative learning theory are often attributed to Jack Mezirow, an American scholar in the field of adult education. Mezirow’s work (1975, 1978, 1991, 2000) focuses on the ways that adult learning is structured, and how the frames of reference with which one views or interprets experiences can be changed. He draws heavily upon constructivist theory, following scholars such as Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg, as well as sociologist Jürgen Habermas’ theories of communicative action. Mezirow proposes that for adults to learn effectively, they must undergo a transformation of “perspective,” in which they call into question their own assumptions about the world (Mezirow, 1991).

According to Mezirow (2000), the individual is invited into an experience of transformation through a “disorienting dilemma,” which can happen naturally (e.g., due to a death in the family, loss of one’s job), or be pedagogically cultivated. He suggests the following sequence of events, which with some variation will lead to perspective transformation:
1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of one’s assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s experience. (p. 22)

**Transformation through Challenge**

As discussed in Chapter One, the idea of a moment of crisis or collapse, precursive to change, is shared by scholars including Homer-Dixon (2006), Henderson (1987), Lerner (2000), and Macy and Brown (1998). This theory is also supported by the research of Marilyn Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Tina Amorok at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS), who surveyed 900 respondents and conducted 50 in-depth interviews with world-renowned scholars, teachers, and practitioners to “explore the phenomenon of consciousness transformation and learn more about the various transformative paths that lead to beneficial outcomes for self and community” (2007, p. 6). In their resulting publication, *Living Deeply*, Schlitz et al. (2007) document various “portals” to transformation. At one end of the spectrum they point to the “portal of pain,” saying:

[P]rofound transformations are frequently triggered by intense suffering or crisis. Difficult or painful life events often create new levels of openness or vulnerability, thus setting the stage for a shift in worldview. A brush with death, the loss of a loved one, a mental or emotional breakdown, an injury, the loss of a job—such painful challenges can shatter defenses that have taken us a lifetime to build. (p. 34)
The “portal of pain” is a powerful one—according to the IONS research, “participants identified pain as far and away the most common catalyst for change” (2007, p. 34). This will be evidenced by the Ecology of Leadership participants’ stories as well. Experiences including job loss or dissatisfaction, the ending of romantic relationships, personal crisis and confusion, family changes, moving, and other challenges led many of the EOL participants “to the garden gates.”

**Orienting Opportunities**

However, despite the evidence for challenge and crisis as a catalyst for transformation, I suggest the possibility of “orienting opportunities” or positive experiences as a counterpoint to “disorienting dilemmas.” In my analysis, Mezirow’s interpretation gives undue weight to negative impetus for transformation, and allows little room for positive impetus. While many individuals are forced into crisis through negative experiences, the possibility also exists for positive or “orienting” moments to lead to a change in perspective and to resulting transformation. I speak to this personally, as my own primary transformative moment in my life at the age of 16 came not through a situation of grief or loss, but rather through a profound spiritual experience as described in the Prelude, which linked my personal reality to the global and the transpersonal. This resulted in an opening to greater possibility, an expansion of my boundaries, and a redefinition of my life purpose and goals to be more universal.

This theory is supported by the IONS researchers, who also found strong evidence for the power of positive catalysts of consciousness transformation. According to their survey results, “exactly equal numbers became interested in transformation after a
difficult life event as due to some other process or event” (2007, p. 40). What Mezirow called “peak experiences” (1970) and Jung called encounters with the numinous (1972), Schlitz et al (2007) describe as “noetic,” or “experiences of awe, beauty and wonder [that] can create deep shifts in the way you view yourself and your place in the world” (p. 41). Some of the potential portals to transformation that they name include mystical experiences, spending time in nature, meeting a teacher, and even the use of psychedelic drugs. A variety of gateways—including encounters with nature, religion or spirituality, an impactful conversation or interaction with another person, or the creation or experience of art—can offer equally significant opportunities for reevaluation and transformation. In the Ecology of Leadership research, this will be demonstrated not only in terms of how individuals enter the process, but also in their experiences during the program.

Whereas Mezirow frames transformative learning as a highly rational and linear process, Robert Boyd and Gordon Myers (1998) propose that transformative learning is in fact informed more by intuitive and emotional processes. This perspective shifts the focus away from the “ego” (central to Mezirow’s theory) and connects transformation to a greater, psychosocial framework of meaning. Such frameworks are expanded in the work of transpersonal psychologists such as Beth Hedva (2001) and Jorge Ferrer (2002). Hedva (2008) refers to four pathways to transformation that are illuminated by Ramses Saleem in The Illustrated Egyptian Book of the Dead (2001)—awakening through 1) the influence of a spiritual master, 2) through discipline and sacrifice in the application of a consistent practice, 3) through an experience of trauma (similar to the disorienting
dilemma), and 4) through an experience of “bliss” or tapping into a vision of beauty and possibility (similar to the “noetic” portals). Saleem (2001) writes:

[This] can be achieved by the presence of a teacher or master. . . . It can also be acquired by the persistence and discipline in applying what the master has instructed. . . . Awakening can also be acquired by trauma and disasters, which act as teachers. For example, people may abuse their body until they have a heart attack, but it is this heart condition that will force them afterward to eat correctly, exercise, and offer prayers of thanks. In this instance, the sickness becomes a blessing. . . . Another means to achieve awakening is through the state of bliss, or the moments in time where emotional conditions force one to suspend the material illusion and see reality. (p. 65)

Hedva’s opening chapter in Betrayal, Trust and Forgiveness (2001) outlines the transformative process as an initiation and rite of passage, in which individuals pass through the five stages of separation, purification, symbolic death, new knowledge, and rebirth. As a transpersonal psychologist, Hedva offers powerful insight and tools for individuals to navigate this transformational journey and also connects it to wider social change.

**Linking Personal Transformation and Collective Transformation**

Some might argue that the theory of transformative learning in fact pre-dates Mezirow, and is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian scholar whose major work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was first published in English in 1970. Developed in the context of rural Brazil, where Freire was working with adult literacy learners from impoverished, marginalized backgrounds, the theory of “conscientization” refers to the process whereby individuals become aware of their own situation of oppression and arise to change it. In this setting, education is a “practice of freedom,” with personal learning and transformation directly linked to social transformation (Freire, 1970). Whereas
Mezirow (1991) focuses on the individual, writing that “adult learning transforms meaning perspectives, not society” (p. 208), and states that there is little agreement as to whether adult learning goals should be subordinated to social goals such as liberty, justice, equality, emancipation, and “so on” (p. 208), Freire posits that “conscientization” is a dialectical process that is simultaneously individual and collective, reflective and active, not consecutive or linear. Once one has been made aware, they must also move into collective action, and through that action in turn deepen their learning, a concept he terms “praxis,” drawing on Marxist and Gramscian notions.

The connection between personal and collective transformation is also made explicit in the work of Edmund O’Sullivan. Trained originally in developmental psychology by Jean Piaget, O’Sullivan moved into social and then critical psychology and pedagogy (1990), working alongside Freire in developing new frames for understanding adult learning and popular education. As O’Sullivan’s work expanded to include a wider awareness of social justice issues, he was simultaneously influenced by the growing ecological consciousness movement and by Thomas Berry’s *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), Fritjof Capra’s *Web of Life* (1996), David Abram’s *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), Mary Oliver’s *New and Selected Poems* (1992), and Charlene Spretnak’s *Resurgence of the Real* (1997). The intersection of these influences led to the dedication of his work to the area of transformative learning, including the establishment in 1993 of the Transformative Learning Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in which this dissertation finds its home.

O’Sullivan’s central theory (1999) is that “the fundamental educational task of our times is to choose a sustainable planetary habitat of interdependent life forms over
and against the dysfunctional calling of the global marketplace” (p. 2). On the one hand, O’Sullivan’s vision of transformation is deeply personal, as evidenced by the following citation:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures, and gender; our body-awarenesses; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (2003, p. 11)

Yet, the key to O’Sullivan’s message is that the descriptions of transformative learning offered in the above passage are in the context of relationship—it is our way of being in the world, our relationships with others and the natural world, our sense of our own self-location and power (thus acknowledging our place in an interlocking system), and our sense of wider possibilities for social justice and peace that define our personal frame for transformation. The educational vision that he articulates is thus not only for the individual adult learner, but to nurture transformative learning for the collective good. This theoretical grounding is key to this dissertation’s perspective, as the Ecology of Leadership program connects the individual’s transformation directly to the ecological or collective transformations that each participant is empowered to make through the program and their resulting engagement in the world.

Other Aspects of Transformative Learning

Several other aspects of transformative learning that will be touched upon throughout this dissertation are addressed by a variety of scholars and practitioners. For example, Robert Boyd (1988), introduced an important element to the dialogue by
acknowledging the role of grieving, stating that individuals need to mourn their old perspectives in order to adopt and transition into the new. Women scholars such as Deena Metzger (2006), Eimear O’Neill, Joanna Macy, Beth Hedva, Sobunfu Some, and Starhawk have led the exploration of the role of grief in transformation. Macy in particular emphasizes practices for working with grief in her “Work that Reconnects.” In Active Hope, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) describe their model of transformation as a spiral—beginning with gratitude, moving next into honoring our pain, then into seeing with new eyes, and finally into going forth. This spiral relates closely to the Ecology of Leadership’s Tree Model, in which individuals first go into their own “roots and soil” work, which often entails delving into grief, before they emerge out into the canopy with new perspectives and the possibility to “go forth” into clearer action.

Anthologies such as Mezirow’s Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress (2000) and O’Sullivan’s Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning, co-edited with Amish Morrell and Mary Ann O’Connor (2003) bring together scholars from diverse fields to offer new interpretations for the field. For example, Laurent A. Parks Daloz (2000) reflects on the life of Nelson Mandela as an example of “Transformative Learning for the Common Good.” Daloz proposes that although we often think of transformation as a sudden event, it is usually based in a historical and social context, leading more to “incremental transformation” than to a sudden leap forward. Mandela (1994) attests to this, stating,

I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments. . . . There was no particular day on which I said, From henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise. (p. 95, cited in Daloz, 2000, p. 106).
While Daloz (2000) recognizes that certain events can catalyze or dramatize a transformation, he suggests this is usually precipitated by a series of small moments of change. In relation to the former discussion on “orienting opportunities,” Daloz also raises the role of positive influences in Mandela’s transformation, indicating that it was not only the “thousand slights and indignities,” but the equally powerful “ten thousand positive events” which were formative to Mandela’s development. From Daloz’s research, key factors which lead individuals to be committed to the common good include feeling recognized as a child, having at least one socially engaged parent, growing up in a diverse neighborhood, being mentored, and, most importantly, having a “constructive engagement with otherness,” in which they developed a positive bond with someone previously viewed as “other” to themselves. These conditions are all based in positive rather than negative experience, confirming that it is not only “disorientation” which makes for transformation, but also having a solid positive base to work from. Daloz closes by suggesting four conditions for transformation: the presence of an “other,” reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action.

The contrast between slow and fast or “revolutionary” versus “evolutionary” change is also discussed in the IONS research. Schlitz et al. (2007) write, “…there are many types of consciousness transformation. Some are sudden, seeming to occur in an instant, and some are gradual—like water wearing away at stone over many years.” (p. 25). One of their survey respondents spoke beautifully of their own process of incremental transformation: “The process was not as a lightning bolt, but rather a gradual revealing, or removing of layers, revealing more of what it seemed I already knew, but could only now name.” (2007, p. 25). Schlitz et al. refer to William James—cited as the
founder of American psychology—having identified two forms of change: “The first is gradual and continuous, like the opening of a flower. The second is sudden or abrupt. In this latter case, change is often associated with what James calls ‘mystical states of consciousness’” (p. 26). Social psychologist Steve Bearman (2013) calls into question this juxtaposition between fast and slow transformation, suggesting that seeming moments of “enlightenment” or breakthrough are actually just “peekthroughs”—glimpses into another reality that could be possible, but that the real transformation happens through a slow, deliberate, and conscious integration of the insight and cultivation of a new way of being over time.

Arriving at the Transformative Journey

In summary, the literatures suggest that individuals arrive at a transformative journey through a variety of gateways or portals. Some come in through the experience of challenge, discomfort, disorientation, and breakdown—the “portal of pain.” Others come in through an experience of connection, wonder, bliss, or a sensed possibility for creating a better reality. Still others come through meeting a teacher or individual who stewards them in and shows them the way. As the dissertation progresses, we will also examine more of the aspects of transformation itself—asking how does transformation occur? What makes it “stick”? What is it about the journey itself that is actually transformative? For example, what is the difference between momentary flashes of insight, breakthrough, or “a-ha” moments, and the kind of slow, incremental transformation discussed by Mandela? However, for now we will remain at the threshold—the entry point into the transformative process.
At the Threshold of the Ecology of Leadership

In the next section, you will meet for the first time some of the participants in the Ecology of Leadership program. Drawing upon the literature on transformative learning, I will discuss what it is that attracts individuals into this particular transformative journey—what brings them “to the garden gates” both literally and figuratively. For the majority of participants, these experiences can be grouped into one of the two major areas described in the above literature—experiences of challenge or disconnection, and experiences of connection and anticipated possibility or opportunity. Within each of these greater categories the data is grouped according to the conceptual framework into the four areas of connection to self, nature, village, and world, with a particular attention to the issue of leadership in the last area.

Disconnection as Gateway

When you ask what my heart space was (before joining the Ecology of Leadership), it was a longing or yearning for a deeper connection to just kind of everything, people around me . . . And I guess at that time, I didn’t even know that that’s what I needed so bad. It just felt like a longing for something more.  
—Regina

The first category of experiences that bring people into the Ecology of Leadership program can be characterized as experiences of disconnection or challenge. When asked what their “state of mind and heart” was before entering the program, many of the interviewees expressed that they were facing some kind of a “disorienting dilemma.” As described by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, “Crisis, suffering, loss, the unexpected encounter with the unknown—all of this has the potential to initiate a shift in perspective.” (Schlitz et al, 2007, p. 37) These disconnections or challenges emerged in a form that was aligned
with those presented in Chapter One—disconnection from self, from nature, from one another, and from one’s purpose or meaningful engagement in the world.

**Disconnection from Self**

The challenge of feeling disconnected from one’s own self was often the first portal that individuals expressed, as they described their internal state of being before coming into the program. This kind of disorienting dilemma can best be described as a gap between one’s true self or highest expression, and the way that one is feeling on a daily basis. For the interviewees, it manifested as feeling uncertain, stuck, in grief, unable to be one’s self, shy, shut down, not fully alive, uncomfortable, afraid, or depressed.

Tim described struggling with personal confusion and grief after a big move and the end of a romantic relationship: “I had kind of moved into a phase of confusion, some grief and uncertainty about sort of where I was. The intention I set and the reason for really coming out was just sort of really, really shook up.”

Several participants expressed feeling “stuck”—unhappy with their existing life circumstances but not sure how to change them. Carle was at an impasse in various aspects of her life—work, relationship, living situation:

I was at a really challenging moment in my life… I was just feeling generally a lot of discontent with life. I just felt really stuck. And I think stagnant is the best word. But I simultaneously wasn’t feeling like I had the motivation to change it either.

Jill expressed a similar experience of collapse, having recently gone through a series of losses in the primary areas of her life:

I knew I had a lot of composting to do, because my life had changed so radically, you know, two years before I started the EOL program, I was a mom with three
kids and a husband and by the time I started the EOL program, I was a single person living in a falling apart house.

Jill turned to EOL in search of community to support her in these major transitions.

Other participants identified feeling disconnected or “not fully alive,” and acknowledged engaging in unhealthy behaviors in order to cope. Michelle said, “I remember feeling like not alive fully and I was drinking a lot the first few months before EOL.” Michelle’s acknowledgement of her drinking is a reflection of a seldom discussed but widespread epidemic within North America of individuals seeking unhealthy means for “filling the void”—be it through typically recognized addictions such as alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, and overeating, or the unhealthy abuse of more “benign” things such as work, TV, internet, co-dependent relationships, shopping, and even exercise. The physician Gabor Maté (2011), who studies addictions, states, “Addictions always originate in unhappiness, even if hidden. They are emotional anesthetics; they numb pain” (p. 24). Maté says, “The first question—always—is not ‘Why the addiction?’ but ‘Why the pain?’” (p. 25). Michelle was able to recognize for herself that this drinking was connected to a deeper sense of feeling unfulfilled.

For Susan, there was a disconnect between who she felt herself to be authentically—“open hearted, totally connected”—and how she was feeling most of the time—“shut down…and scared to be myself in the world.” Coming to EOL meant seeking out an environment in which she could get support to really be herself. She said, I was like 25, and felt like I had done so much growth and was really happy with the person that I was. But I felt like there was this really big disconnect. . . . I felt like there was this one world with certain friends, and then my USM community where I was totally openhearted, totally connected, and then the rest of the world where I was showing up and was, well, I wasn’t really (showing up). I was really shut down, and closed down and scared to be myself in the world. . . . So, I came into EOL knowing that I needed support. Feeling really shy and in-drawn.
Donna also related a very similar feeling of wanting to be more authentic in her life:

[All of those realizations about this disconnect between who I am and who I think people think I’m supposed to be was really evident to me. And I wanted to move forward into that place. I wanted to be more of who I am. And so that’s why I chose to do the work.

Underneath these participants’ remarks, I identified a seldom named but palpable deeper thread—the emotion identified by social researcher Brené Brown as shame. Brown refers to shame as “the fear of disconnection—the fear of being perceived as flawed and worthy of acceptance or belonging.” (2007, xxv.) What distinguishes the subjects in this dissertation is that rather than getting stuck permanently in the depression or shame, the experience of disconnection inspired them to seek out EOL as a means to transform their internal conditions and reconnect with their own authentic selves.

**Disconnection from the Natural World**

In the realm of nature connection, participants also spoke of a disconnect. Jeff M. talked about a feeling of opposition or needing to protect himself against nature. He said, “I had grown up with [this idea that] . . . you need to kind of protect yourself with nature. . . . You might have a great garden and grow food, but it’s not our friend so to speak.” He went on to share about how at the time he chose to join EOL, he was becoming a tour guide for the salmon spawning grounds:

You need the rain for them to be able to spawn, because that’s both the pathway and the calling for the salmon. And I just remember this feeling of conflict about that [having to be out in the rain]. . . . Someone was like “Dude, just get a good set of rain gear.” Enjoy it instead of trying to somehow fight the elements . . . it was the window of time where it switched from being this thing that I’m trying to avoid or protect myself from. How can I best be in it?
For Michelle, she sensed a lack of a deep nature connection in the communities she was participating in: “There were many beautiful aspects of the community I was in, but there was some key pieces missing. They weren’t as nature-sourced or nature-involved as I had been in my past, and that was a core issue for me.” She also recognized the greater disconnect that was happening as a result in her life: “I could tell that my ecologies were disconnected, not well nourished, not regenerative. Ecology lived in me as a language. The first thing that called me was the possibility of nature.”

Even individuals who had been working in scientific and permaculture contexts were feeling some disconnection between those worlds and the nature connection they were longing for. Regina recalled: “I had been in the science world, a scientist before that. I studied science and trained in that realm, and was having a difficult time finding passion for it and drive for it.” For Regina, there was a difference between studying the natural world, and really experiencing a deep connection with it. It was only as she began farming and put her own hands “in the dirt” that she realized this possibility.

Although a disconnect from nature was less named by participants than other factors, interviewees later recognized how much they were missing this piece once they began to cultivate a nature connection practice. As stated by Regina, “I guess at that time, I didn’t even know that that’s what I needed so bad.” In modern society, we are so removed from deep nature connection that we are not even aware of it as something that is impacting us.
Disconnection from Others

The feeling of being alone, the search for meaningful community and various forms of breakdown in relationships were all strong indicators that led people to participate in EOL. For some participants who were experiencing regular nature connection, it was lack of integration of the social aspect, or connection to one another, that was missing. Kyle shared: “I was in Oregon in a permaculture homestead... it was really cool, off the grid, growing most of their food... The whole nine yards, but not the whole nine yards. Their social aspect was just tired, not working.” Jill expressed a similar discontent: “I had lost interest in gardening. Gardening has been like my meditation for 15 years or so... suddenly I was just tired of being alone, working alone... So I came across the EOL program, and it sounded really good for me.”

Other participants had moved recently to the area and were looking to cultivate community. Jeff shared, “I was living up the coast with some great people in a great house in a small community, but feeling very disconnected from my communities having branched myself out from living 12 years in the bay area. I was cut off from most of my community on the east bay and sort of creating a new life in Santa Cruz.” Ericka was seeking a deeper experience of “home” after having moved from Brazil: “I was always... not really connecting on a soul level with this new home... My marriage was also not feeling connected.”

A breakdown in interpersonal relationships was a powerful factor that influenced many individuals in making the choice to join EOL. As shown above already by Carle, Tim, Jill, and Ericka, the ending of a romantic relationship was highly prevalent. Tim elaborated:
(I) had just ended my relationship with my partner and was in a transition. I had . . some regret and shame about sort of how the relationship had went and ended . . that was really big. It was definitely a hard time when EOL started.

The ending of a romantic relationship was also a factor for Michelle, Jeff M. and Tara:

I was coming out of a serious, committed relationship that I know now that I’m very blessed that it ended. We wouldn’t have served each other, to bring our gifts to the world or nourish each other. But at the time, I was upset that it had ended, and it wasn’t the most loving.—Michelle

I had spent a year in a relationship that just, it was like painful and wondering: what the heck am I doing? . . . there was that sense of . . . I’m just going to take a year and I’m going to figure this out.—Jeff M

Yea, last year I was really down in the dumps. My husband and I were divorcing. I had no job. I have two little kids. We were losing our house. I was just like, ‘wow, okay. How did I get myself here in this position?’ And it wasn’t like I didn’t know how to do things. I did some amazing things in my life, but having kids just kind of changed my world and I didn’t know how to deal with life with kids and no support. I had no support around me. So I was trying to do everything by myself basically.—Tara

For myself, I joined the Ecology of Leadership as I was going through a marital separation. During the five months of my participation in the program, I was in the process of moving my family, including my previous partner and our two small children, to California. Working through that transition in a good way, while being supported by the EOL community and engaging the practices of the program, ended up being a major aspect of my experience as a participant.

Other kinds of family transitions were central for other participants as well. As mentioned by Jill above, her divorce meant suddenly living on her own as her three children also chose to move out of her home. Jill’s choice to join EOL was largely motivated by the desire to find meaningful connections with others. In her sharing circle at the EOL convergence, she said, “Almost everything that I have to say about EOL was
about the people that I met . . . the quality of people that it brought together was
everything to me.”

Donna’s children were coming of age and moving out of the house, which had
implications for both her and her marriage:

One piece would be with my kids in kind of a transition place. My children were
very close to adulthood, late teens, and how does my role shift in relationship to
them? Family dynamics and things like that. But also probably even more so, my
relationship with my husband. . . . We’ve been married for . . . it’s going to be 25
years this June, so there’s a lot along that journey and . . . When you have kids,
there’s like a natural parting that can happen because of different jobs, different
roles that you have. And often times I’ve seen families, parents either come back
together as the kids get older, or they completely go their separate ways. So there
was that question—what’s that going to look like for us?

For Michelle, in addition to the other factors already mentioned above, she was a
full-time caregiver for her aging father:

The other piece personally where I was in transition was that I hadn’t really
stabilized my dad’s care situation, and he had just gone through a decline
mentally and physically, and I was very overwhelmed with that.

As demonstrated by these interviewees, the experience of challenge and
breakdown in community and relationships of various kinds was a primary driver for
many individuals to enter the Ecology of Leadership. For the interviewees, the sense that
their interpersonal relationships were not functioning at an optimal level and that there
must be a better way was a key factor in their journey to the garden gates.

**Disconnection from Purpose and Meaningful Engagement in the World**

Perhaps more than any other factor, participants are called into the Ecology of
Leadership because of a deep search for meaning and purpose in their engagement in the
world. Lauren, an eco-chaplain who was working in the corporate sustainability field, expressed that discontent:

I made a pretty big career shift in 2007 and started to work as a chaplain but in a corporate setting in the area of sustainability. . . . And then, as the corporate structure would have it and because I was successful at what I was doing, I was promoted. And with each promotion . . . every tier took me further and further from what I initially started to do in the work and what lit me up. And so . . . I was arriving at RDI pretty depleted, pretty disillusioned, very frustrated . . . because in some ways I was getting all of this affirmation for being so great at what I was doing and getting more compensation financially than I ever gotten in my life and yet I was not happy.

Carl shared a similar unhappiness with working in the corporate setting. He described a growing awakening to the greater world crises, and a realization that he was contributing to the world’s problems rather than working to solve them:

I was working in the corporate world. I was very unhappy . . . that light bulb that went off where I realized I was part of the problem and not the solution. And that I was in a job just for a paycheck. And that didn’t really sit with me. As I was going through and waking up, that became less and less comfortable. So I found EOL through the process of being uncomfortable.

Others came to EOL having left their jobs or wanting a change. Tim had just left his job with a big sustainability consulting firm and was looking for his next step: “I had just left my job and had moved out here. . . . I was just really looking for some clarity about what the next chapter in my life was.” Carle said, “I was feeling totally unhappy with my job. It was a really toxic work environment and I had been wanting to leave it for awhile.”

Regina described the feeling of not being actualized in her work, and wanting to move beyond financial survival to “something more”:

I knew I had this sense that I had something to give and work to do in this world and I just didn’t feel like I was doing it fully expressed. It’s like, yea okay, I can get a job and I can make money. I can survive, but I wasn’t happy with that. There’s got to be something more and what is it?
The question of seeking a deeper level of purpose and meaning in one’s work and contribution to the world is a typical driver for individuals to enter transformative journeys. This is certainly true for many of the participants who come into the Ecology of Leadership program. In some cases these individuals come into the program wanting to change jobs but through the process discover ways to transform their existing contexts from within. For others, their existing professions or service paths are called into question through the process of joining the program.

**Disconnected Leadership**

It is not surprising that in the context of disconnection happening on so many levels, that we are also experiencing a crisis of leadership. Michelle made a direct link between her expressed feelings of disconnection in the areas of self, nature, and purpose, and with the way that she saw herself as a leader:

> I had a lot of arrogance I was leading with, which was really just a whole defensive construct around insecurity, and I think that insecurity came from how deeply disconnected I felt to . . . the natural world? My core purpose had become obscured.

Jill also felt that her inner work was preventing her from achieving her full leadership capacity: “I recognize that my . . . um, internal stuff was keeping me from being a decent leader.”

A key disconnect expressed by our interviewees was between the societal expectations of what a “leader” is and finding one’s own authentic model of leadership. These expectations may come from external environments, or from one’s own
worldviews and internal expectations of self. Donna was leading a successful non-profit organization, Outside Now, when she had a realization that shook her:

I had this very uncomfortable, strong realization that I didn’t see myself as a leader. I had been an Executive Director for two years, but a label does not make a person a leader. And in that exercise we were with a partner, and I remember my partner saying, when I stated that I didn’t see myself as a leader, he said “I wish you could see me, see you through my eyes, because I see you so clearly as a leader.” And I just burst into tears.

For Donna, it was her own expectations of who and how a leader should be that were stopping her from fully stepping into her leadership role. She expressed having a lot of self-judgment, some walls up between me and other people. Just thinking that my vision of a leader at that time was a CEO at the top of a pyramid. The middle-aged, bald white guy in a suit. And somehow I didn’t fit that image, and I had a really hard time seeing myself that way.

This idea that the leader needed to be a “middle-aged, bald white guy in a suit” prevented Donna from feeling confident and able to be her authentic self as a leader. She acknowledged that before EOL she had “very little self-confidence.” She felt afraid to reveal her vulnerability while in a leadership role, believing that a leader needs to be strong or invincible. She described herself as thinking that I needed to appear a certain way as a leader and be this strong pillar and always know what to do, ‘never let them see you sweat’ and all that kind of stuff. Scary as all to think that I’m supposed to know . . . and it kept me from fully engaging in the work and from being me, because I didn’t know. And I was afraid to say that.

For Donna, coming into EOL was in part driven by a desire to find her own model of authentic leadership with which she could direct her organization.

Carol affirmed the challenge of authentic leadership in the corporate setting, having worked at companies such as Google, eBay and PayPal:

Because of where I was ending up in my corporate life, I was sort of understanding what leadership really was, because leadership in the corporate
context is a very particular kind of thing. And it can work really well, but it often doesn’t. And I’ve gone through different kinds of management training, and . . . I was being asked to have leadership around certain things, and in spite of that training, felt very poorly equipped to do that in a way that felt authentic and good.

Even though the companies that Carol worked for are renowned for their progressive cultures, she said that authenticity was often discouraged in those settings. She suggested that being authentic could actually be dangerous in the corporate world, particularly when there are power dynamics at play and your job is at stake, saying, “Corporate environments conspire against authenticity in so many ways. It’s a real problem, it leads to a lot of . . . disaffection and loss of productivity.”

Being a leader in that setting was challenging—Carol expressed a disconnect between her own values around leadership and the way that she was expected by the company to manage her team:

When you’re part of a big company . . . you have all of these HR things you’re responsible for as managers, like doing people’s annual and quarterly reviews, and deciding who gets bonuses and who doesn’t . . . and force ranking your people . . . there’s a lot of that process that doesn’t feel like it has a lot of integrity to it. You feel kind of dirty at the end of the day.

Although she was able to practice leading by example when she first started as a manager with a small team, this became more challenging as she moved up the corporate ladder, and as larger corporations bought small companies she worked for. She said, “When you have a company of 20,000 people, you have to have those kinds of things on some level, otherwise you’re subject to all kinds of crazy lawsuits . . . you’re not allowed in a certain way to be holistic about judging their performance.” These challenges led her to enroll in EOL as a means to find a more authentic model of leadership.

Other participants were being asked to take on leadership roles but felt a lack of confidence in their own ability or comfort to do so. Jeff Z. was compelled to join EOL in
part because he was being recognized as a leader and wanted to cultivate his capacity to be more skillful in that role:

The Ecology of Leadership program . . . really spoke to a discomfort I had around being called upon to be a leader in a lot of situations. I had been in a lot of situations where people looked to me to provide leadership and I had often felt reluctant to . . . step into that role, but it just kept showing up in my life as something I needed to do and that I needed to be comfortable with, regardless of how well I could do it and to be comfortable with it—the idea that leadership is something that is reflected by the communities around me.

Jeff used his experience in EOL to step more overtly into his leadership by joining the alumni facilitation team.

**Possibility as Gateway**

Thus far this chapter has focused on the myriad forms of challenge and disconnection that drive individuals to seek a transformative pathway. Clearly the “portal of pain” is a powerful motivator for many of the participants. We have seen that a feeling of disconnection from the self, from the natural world, from one another, and from a sense of meaning and purposeful engagement in the world are all classic scenarios that lead individuals into the Ecology of Leadership. However, equally potent were positive experiences and a sense of the possibility for cultivating connection in those same areas of self, nature, village, and world.

**Called to Cultivating Connection with Self**

When considering entering the Ecology of Leadership, one of the first elements that interviewees identified was the possibility to take time out of their busy lives for self-reflection and self-assessment. This was of particular importance to Jeff Z., “[I was]
really checking in with myself about where my various paths and choices had taken me and hungry for an opportunity to do that, to have a framework to do that in.” Tim expressed a similar draw to having an opportunity for reflection as well as for visioning and setting intentions for where he was going in his life, while being held by a supportive community:

It felt like, wow what a great opportunity to really take some time and have some support to think about what do I really want my life to look like? So it really matched both on an emotional level and in helping me have some support to help me get through a hard time.

Jeff M. was drawn in particular to the program’s focus on change from the “inside out” as opposed to other programs he had participated in that more emphasized outer skills:

I had spent a lot of time over the years thinking well if I’m going to be good at things I need to go get a course on how to keep my time, something like that. Always trying to change myself I guess sort of from the outside in, and I liked the aspect of maybe somehow a different way, different approach.

Some participants, like Susan and Carl, had already entered a process of self-development that they were looking to continue. Susan had just completed a master’s program in Spiritual Psychology, and described having gone through a spiritual awakening and transformation of her belief systems in the two years before joining EOL. She was struggling to integrate this awakening into her daily life, and was swinging between feeling happy and connected and emotionally closed and disconnected, so she saw EOL as a way to get support for experiencing this connection on a more consistent basis. Carl expressed a similar experience of coming to EOL having already begun to cultivate a deeper connection with himself: “In the year or months leading up to EOL I
was going through some real self-discovery. Psychotherapy. Exploring various spiritual paths.”

The desire for being more authentic also appeared in interviewee’s comments as a positive driver for those that sensed this as a possibility through the program. For Kyle, this was a central factor in his joining EOL as part of a series of non-traditional educational experiences that he chose instead of attending university. He was just 20 years old when he joined the program:

I think there’s a wave of authenticity hitting our planet . . . and I cultivated that in doing these other things instead of going to a traditional school . . . For me, I wanted something that was more connected and raw and real and practical, integrated . . . I feel like EOL really can kind of create a stand for a new model of education.

Other participants expressed more of an intuitive knowledge that EOL would support them in their personal development. Regina expressed this as a feeling of “Yes” that resonated with the direction she wanted to go in her life: “I immediately knew that it was a place I was supposed to be and supposed to go. It was a really easy decision. It was a strong yes in my life. It was like, oh yea, this is it.” Carle shared the similar experience of a clear knowing:

So, I heard about EOL . . . I can’t remember exactly how I heard about it, but then I listened to a podcast with James and Christopher. And it was like boom—it just hit my body; I was like I need to do this program. It was like a very clear knowing in my body to do it. So I did.

I resonate with this sense of intuitive knowing, as I had a similar experience to Carle upon my first visit to RDI of feeling my body. Hedva (personal communication, 2013) describes this kind of knowing as indicated by having one’s “body relaxed, heart open, and mind clear.”
Called to Cultivating Connection with Nature

The call to a deeper connection with the natural world was also expressed by several of the interviewees. Many of them came into the Ecology of Leadership directly through the Regenerative Design Institute’s permaculture programs. Tara shared that “during my permaculture class, James came and spoke about EOL and I’m like, ‘that’s going to take me to my vision of what permaculture . . . what I can do with permaculture, by taking that class.’” Jeff M. and Carol both began EOL after completing RDI’s four seasons permaculture design course. Carle also learned about EOL through RDI’s website as she was interested in permaculture.

Like those that had already begun a self-connection journey, others had also begun a nature connection journey that they wanted to continue to develop. Regina, who had previously been a scientist, said, “I began farming. That felt really good, just getting very connected to nature and having my hands in the dirt and being connected to the seasons and every day.” Her awakening into farming led her to look for more opportunities to deepen her nature connection.

Susan came into EOL through her connection with the University of Santa Monica’s master’s program in Spiritual Psychology, which EOL founder James Stark had also completed. Each summer RDI hosts a summer camp week for the USM program, and Susan came for that camp experience and fell in love with Commonweal Garden. She described it as follows:

Just having a magical experience when I was on that land, just camping and playing. . . . It just felt really appropriate. And also my own background of nature has always been the place where I feel most connected to spirit. And that just calls my heart so it just felt like a really good fit.
Personally, the nature connection component was the largest draw for me to conduct my research with the Regenerative Design Institute. I felt relatively well connected in the self, other, and world categories, having spent the previous 15 years pursuing a conscious self-development path while working with dialogue and group process settings in communities around the world. I could sense that what I was missing was the integration of these pieces with a deeper level of nature connection. This is not to say that I did not already feel connected to the natural world—I grew up in rural New England, became a Girl Scout at a young age, and spent many nights and weekends and summers out camping, sailing and exploring. As an adult, I continued this trend—I spent a summer hiking through rural Nepal, sought regular outdoor adventures, and worked for an Indigenous-based outdoor education organization for five years. I have always felt most at home in environments that are surrounded by natural beauty, and like Susan the natural world has been the place that has felt like my “church” or where I most strongly feel a connection to Spirit.

On the surface, it would appear that I was well connected to the natural world. However, Jon Young draws a distinction between four levels of human relationship to nature—nature information, nature experience, nature connection, and deep nature connection (Scott, 2013, pp. 70–73), indicating that there is a difference between random moments of connection and the sustained development of an intimate knowing of the natural world. I believe that prior to EOL I was operating consistently at the levels of nature experience and nature connection, but had not yet cultivated a consistent deep nature connection. In addition I was living a very modern life—when I began my research, I was living in urban Canada, immersed in technological and built structure
environments—and could feel the impact of this on my mind, body and spirit. My call to deepen my nature connection was thus an intuitive one—I felt that in order to balance the intensity of the intellectual process of the PhD I needed to also be grounding in the earth. I was also tracking the rise of programs in permaculture, farming, reskilling, and returning to more land-based ways of being, and understood that reconnecting in this way is a big part of the movement of the Great Turning.

On an intuitive level, when I arrived on the land at RDI, I had a similar “body knowing” to that described above by Carle. The first thing that happened was that I literally fell asleep—my body relaxing into a deep state of comfort that I can only describe as a sense of safety and being at home. When I awoke, I wandered out by a tree and prayed—my spirit recognizing the land there as sacred. I also cried—my heart opened by the land into grief, vulnerability, wonder, and possibility. Thus I was drawn not only by the concept of developing a deeper nature connection through participating in the program and a collaboration with RDI, but literally by my experience with the land itself, and a profound resonance and calling in my body, spirit, and heart.

**Called to Cultivating Connection with One Another**

Just as a breakdown in relationships was a key driver for people to enter EOL, the sensed possibility to experience a higher quality of relationship and community was also a calling. Regina said that she came in with the question, “how do I connect more to community? Everybody wants more community and everyone’s saying that, but how do we really do it? And how do we come together and really support each other?” Kyle, who
had been working at a permaculture homestead, heard about RDI from another woman who was working there:

And she was like oh, I met this guy in California . . . and his community . . . gives a lot of importance on the social permaculture, which is really on the root of all our problems. All our consciousness and decisions and what not. That just lit me up. A huge light inside of me. That’s what I want to do. Be on his side of permaculture. His side of maintaining life on Earth. Really creating social cohesion, community that . . . unconditional love and acceptance. And figuring out what needs to come together to create the world I want to live in. On a feelings level, that’s like groundwork. Baseline cohesion.

For Kyle, the integration of the social aspect together with inner transformation and the permaculture component was something that he had not experienced elsewhere, and that made clear his choice to join EOL:

For me, it’s because of the focus on the social aspect, human aspect . . . I didn’t take a traditional route, I did a lot of research about programs like this. Everything from massage therapy to . . . all these kind of things . . . I looked a lot for what felt right. And I think what RDI, why it attracted me was the whole package. It felt complete. It felt like they were paying attention to every aspect of life and they had their hands in the dirt . . . Other places were more hermit style, instead of really looking at the human issue and the deeper essence of why we are where we’re at. And to me, that’s why I was attracted to it, because that’s more my nature.

Others were brought in by witnessing transformation of their friends or colleagues in some of their existing relationships: Lauren described a woman at her company who had been through EOL:

I was seeing her change. And I was her manager. So I was really hearing some really intimate details of ways she was being moved and mushed around at EOL. And I actually saw her manifest her vision and leave this country to go and do some work that was really important to her and it was all as a result of EOL. So that was a pretty good endorsement.

Toni shared a similar reason for choosing to participate, based on the recommendation of a close friend:
My dear friend Heather suggested EOL . . . so I really saw her as this gift, this angel—I trust her, and I watched her journey and (I) stepped through another portal, you know into empowerment and self-discovery in new profound ways.

Jill talked about the quality of the people themselves that attracted her to EOL:

There’s people who are political activists but don’t have any spirituality, and there’s people who have . . . that are just, really down to earth people, but they don’t think beyond the nuts and bolts of things. You know, my father, the old farmer—really neat person, but he just loves to have his hands in the soil . . . . So it’s like EOL, the people that came together were people who could bridge all three of those. And it was new agey, but it wasn’t airy-fairy—it was hands in the dirt, but it had words. And people understood activism. So it’s always great to feel at home with a group of people. It’s really unusual in life.

For Elyse, it was seeing the possibility of having a different kind of experience around her marriage and family life that called her to participate:

When I first experienced kind of getting open to it, it was James leading a vision talk during my permaculture class. And it’s really interesting because during that I envisioned you know my future life and the perfect day. I had two children and my husband and I had built our home, and we lived in a very beautiful, happy place. When I came to, I was really shaking, because I’ve been struggling with infertility. And it was so painful to come back to reality. To feel like that dream was maybe nothing I could achieve.

Although Elyse tapped into the pain of an existing challenge—not being able to conceive—it was the power of visioning a different possibility through EOL that led her to enroll. As will be seen in the following chapters, the seed of possibility that Elyse felt in that moment became a prescient indicator for what would become possible for her with the support of a village through the program.

As described previously, the possibility to cultivate a community of support also draws many individuals into participating in EOL. For myself, as I was just moving to California when I began EOL-8, I was aware of the opportunity to build relationships that could be supportive to me in that transition as well as to build a lasting community after the program was complete. This experience has been echoed by many participants, who
chose to join EOL either as they were moving to the area, or who sensed that given the transitions they were moving through, they wanted to create a new kind of community in which their new selves could be birthed. In this way, attraction to building resilient and meaningful relationships with one another draws individuals into the program.

**Called to Cultivating Purpose and Meaningful Engagement in the World**

Whereas some individuals come into EOL feeling disengaged with their purpose, many others are called in by a clear vision of what they want to create. Elyse wanted a more meaningful career: “I came here to try to start a non-profit. That’s why I moved here in June, so there was a lot of intention behind that.” Regina wanted to build on her background in science as well as in counseling to step more into a mentorship role in helping connect people to nature and to one another:

I knew I wanted to connect people to nature and had done a lot of work in restoration and healing this planet. I felt that there was this bridge between people and nature and the connection and healing and all that. I had it all swirling in my head, like we can be more connected than we are to all of this and there’s some key in there to healing.

Others were not necessarily clear about what their contributions would be, but came in with an excitement and readiness to find out. For Jeff M.: “I was trying to figure out what’s next for me . . . kind of ready to do something else, just exploring the sense of what can I do in relation to sustainability?” Kyle powerfully linked his own personal discovery process with a fierce curiosity and commitment to finding out what he is meant to do in the world and how he could serve most effectively:

It was a combination of finding out what the world means, and finding out what I mean. . . . I was really just trying to find just who I was. What I was doing with my life. How I fit in with the bigger picture. What are my gifts? What are my natural abilities to offer? The only way I could really be about the world was to be about
me in the sense of connecting with myself in a powerful way so I could connect
with the world in a powerful way. It was trying to find that balance of inner power
and expression of that.

**Called to Cultivating Leadership**

The connection between engagement in the world and stepping into greater
leadership was also a draw for participants. Jill explained,

> I had just graduated from college, I felt like I wanted to launch out into a new
career path, and I felt like the leadership skills would be wonderful and all that.
So that’s what drew me to it . . . the description was like, yup, that’s exactly what
I want.

Lauren sensed that she could be bringing her experience in ecology more centrally into
her role as a leader both as a chaplain and in the sustainability sector: “I’m certainly a
leader and I’m certainly informed by ecology, but maybe there’s something that could
happen there that could allow me to sort of more consciously bring these worlds
together.” Ericka, who was in a leadership role with the Brazil-Canada Alliance, also felt
compelled by the focus on leadership, saying that it was this aspect that caught her
attention when looking at the RDI website:

> I’m all about leadership/community leadership/leadership development. . . . And
I look and there’s Ecology of Leadership . . . and I’m like “oh my gosh.” You
know that ‘a-ha’ moment . . . (it) seemed like a great fit for my journey of
personal development that year.

Participants particularly expressed an interest in the possibility to develop their capacity
as leaders in a context that would integrate their inner development with the simultaneous
development of skills for outer application in the external world. As stated by Kyle, “It’s
clear that RDI has a holistic approach. It’s not just about the internal part; it’s also about
the external part.” Cashman (2008) speaks to this quality of integral leadership:
Unfortunately, many people tend to split off the act of leadership from the person, team or organization. . . . We only see it as something people do. . . . Leadership is not simply something we do. It comes from a deeper reality within us; it comes from our values, principles, life experiences and essence. Leadership is a process, an intimate expression of who we are. It is our whole person in action. (p. 22)

The longing to experience and embody a different model of leadership is a clear need not only within the participants in the world but also in the world at large.

**The Gateway to Holistic Transformation is Multifaceted**

In this chapter, I have examined some of the key literature in the field of transformative education, which provides a grounding for the ensuing chapters in the existing transformative learning theory. I then introduced you to a number of the participants who are the main characters in this dissertation. While the remainder of the dissertation will focus on how these individuals are transformed through their participation in the Ecology of Leadership, here we had the opportunity to hear the first glimpses of their stories, before they even arrived at the garden gates. We learned a little about what was happening for them in their lives before they entered the program, what inspired them to enter a transformative learning journey, and what brought them specifically to the threshold of the Ecology of Leadership.

For the majority of participants, it was not one sole factor that led to their participation, but rather the integration of a number of simultaneous factors, which together catalyzed their readiness to enter a transformative process. Tim had not only moved across the country, left his job, and ended a relationship, leading him to struggle personally with grief and confusion and the desire to take some time out for self-reflection—he also felt called to be connected to a community that could support him in
this transition and help him move towards his visions of a new life. Regina was not just looking to leave her background as a scientist to become a farmer—she sensed a possibility to integrate deeper nature connection with the cultivation of interpersonal connections and the development of leadership skills that would help her achieve her dream of becoming a mentor. Donna could have chosen another leadership program that would help her to develop the skills and confidence to support her in her role as an Executive Director—but she was also grappling with a transition in her family situation, growing children, a new period of discovery in her relationship with her husband, and a strong desire to overcome personal insecurities that were preventing her from becoming her most authentic self.

These examples are significant, as they demonstrate an aspect of the transformative journey that I have not yet found documented in the literature. Whereas most of the existing literature points to one primary driver for transformation, a specific experience of breakdown or breakthrough—e.g. a heart attack—and in turn one primary pathway or practice to usher in that transformation—e.g. the cultivation of a meditation practice—the story that my data tells is far more complex. The landscape that leads individuals to the gates of a transformative process is as holistic and multifaceted as the transformative journey that they are about to embark upon. In the case of the Ecology of Leadership, the research shows that participants enroll as a consequence of an entire spectrum of experiences within the categories of both disconnection and sensed possibility for connection—relating to the multiple areas of their lives all at once, including their relationship with their selves and their inner development, their connection with the natural world, their relationships with others, including romantic
partners, family, colleagues, and community members, and their purpose and meaningful engagement in the world, including the actualization of their leadership. This holistic spectrum of causal factors is fitting for the nature of the journey that they are about to step into—as the Ecology of Leadership invites participants to transform not just one aspect of their life, but the whole.

I invite you to hold on to these threads as we now move into the actual journey of these participants through the Ecology of Leadership. These origin stories will appear again—as eventually we learn about how Donna found her own authentic leadership style with Outside Now, how Ericka created a sense of “home,” how Jeff M. transformed his romantic relationships, how Regina became a mentor, and more. The longings expressed here are the seeds of possibility, potential, and “catagenesis” that were planted, that participants carried with them as they arrived at the garden gates.
CHAPTER FIVE: CULTIVATING FERTILE SOIL

In this chapter, I examine the conditions that help cultivate a fertile field for growth and transformation. We enter Commonweal Garden for the first time, and I describe the participants’ initial impressions and experiences. I then introduce you to the core components of the curriculum that create the foundation for the Ecology of Leadership. This begins with the development of core routines: gratitude, building a shared field of intentions, journaling, and a practice called the “sit spot,” which helps connect participants with the natural landscape.

Journey to the Fire Circle

The trip to the Regenerative Design Institute’s property at Commonweal Garden can feel like an epic journey. Although it is located just over an hour northwest of San Francisco, my first drive there seemed to go on forever. From the turnoff at Mill Valley, the two-lane road winds through coastal redwood forests that nearby constitute the famous Muir Woods, and then emerges high above the Pacific Ocean for a breathtaking view of the curving coastline. On the day that I first travelled to RDI, the characteristic fog was hugging the shoreline, making each turn a gamble, as it was difficult to discern where the road ended and the several hundred foot drop into the ocean began. Finally the road straightens out a bit as you enter the little seashore town of Stinson Beach, a good spot to stop and recover from the curves, stretch your legs or touch the water. Just north of Stinson the expansive Bolinas lagoon comes into view, a rich wetland filled with waterfowl and harbor seals. Following the lagoon around to the left, a right turn on Mesa
Road signals the last stretch of road before arriving at RDI. Passing through open cow fields and Eucalyptus groves, the road enters the southern tip of the Point Reyes National Seashore, home to numerous species of wildlife—at any point, a fox, deer, or bobcat may be crossing. As the ocean comes into view again, the road passes the headquarters of Commonweal (a health and environmental research institute and retreat center which also umbrellas other non-profits, including RDI), after which the next right is the inconspicuous turn into Commonweal Garden.

Participants making their way to the first weekend of an Ecology of Leadership five-month course express a range of emotions that accompany them along that drive. Carle talked about feeling anxious and hoping briefly that the course would be cancelled so that she wouldn’t have to go through with it:

I remember, it was a beautiful drive, but there’s this place where you’re looping around the lagoon, that I remember having this thought. Maybe it’ll just be cancelled and I won’t have to go. And having this fantasy unfold in my brain, because I was feeling really nervous.

This nervousness was tempered by her excitement, and trust in her “body knowing” about the course being right for her: “But I was also feeling really excited. I remember saying I’m just going to take a few deep breaths and trust that my body knew that this is the right place to go.” Jeff Z gave a great description of the hopes and anticipations that he was holding as he came into his first weekend:

A lot of excitement of course about what is this going to be? Is this going to turn me into Superman? Is this my spinach that’s going to make me super strong? Is this going to help? Who are these people? Who’s coming here? Is this my tribe? Is this aligned, hearts and minds? . . . It felt like a good step in a positive direction, a strong step towards something that was calling.

I felt a similar combination of excitement, anticipation and nervousness on my first drive. It seemed to take forever, and I was on the phone multiple times with Dylan, RDI’s
office assistant, just trying to find my way. After my last wrong turn (into the
Commonweal headquarters), where I was warmly greeted and redirected by Dylan,
I proceeded the final few hundred yards to Commonweal Garden.

After turning right into 480 Mesa Road, the participants roll slowly up the
driveway and into one of the parking spots along the meadow. Walking up past the
milking goats, a free range chicken coop, and the newly built barn/classroom and office
space, participants pause to sign in at the registration table in front of the gate. They are
welcomed by alumni standing at the entrance, perhaps with a hug, a song, or a friendly
smile. Tim talked about how it felt when he arrived at RDI:

It was a warm, welcoming feeling. You could feel that you were stepping into a
space with people that were there for good reasons and who have committed to
the program and were really open and excited about what they were about to go
through.

Donna talked about the
quality of connection and
intimacy that she
experienced through the
welcoming:

I remember being nervous about
going there on
time. I didn’t
know how far it
would be …So I
was one of the first
people there…And I remember that there was a table out front…Katrina [an
alumna] was there, greeting everyone, giving us a hug. So it was very welcoming
from the get go. It was like we’d known each other from somewhere before. And
that was my experience…that immediate and quick connection and comfort level
and safety with people.

Figure 5.1—Commonweal Garden
Participants then enter the heart of the property for the first time through the “Garden Gate”—a large, wooden, hand-crafted gate, beautifully designed to look like trees in a forest. The pathway is lined with an abundance of roses along the fork to the left, which leads past the yurt classroom to the first gathering place for the morning—the fire circle, a ring of wooden benches with a stone circle in the center where hundreds of community fires have been lit. On this day, it is decorated as an altar, surrounded by flowers and cedar boughs. People are beginning to gather, saying hello, meeting for the first time, giving hugs, getting their morning tea or coffee from the greenhouse, and preparing to begin.

Lauren gave a visceral representation of her first impressions of being at RDI:

I can smell Commonweal Garden. I can remember what it was like crawling into my tent and loving that I was not in my cubicle in San Francisco…the first invitations around the fire circle that came from James and his hat and Christopher with his mug of hot drink. Just really the invitation to arrive in a different way. And there was so much about EOL that I didn’t know yet in that moment.

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4 The gate was co-designed by Todd Beeson, Penny Livingston-Stark and James Stark, and built by Beeson and Erin Campbell.
Carl brought us into the first weekend of EOL through his connections with the landscape there:

As the day starts, so do my memories. And that picture would begin with a field. Mist in the morning. Maybe it’s a little cold; maybe I didn’t want to get out of bed, or out of my tent. The sound of the ocean and the intentions that were set on that particular day. . . . The magic that would happen as a result of that . . . and realizing wow I really have a lot to learn from the direction of the wind, or the movement of a brush, or that tiny little insect that I don’t know the name of but is beautiful and alive and has a purpose.

There is a palpable buzz of excitement, nervousness, possibility, curiosity, and anticipation in the air as each member of the circle steps into the fire circle ring and the collective begins to build.

Having now participated in five EOL circles, the first weekend always carries an extra flair of excitement, uncertainty, and butterflies in the stomach. As the days approach, I wonder, who are the individuals that are coming together to make up this group? What will be the unique constellation that they co-create? How will their lives change through their participation in the program? Since becoming a facilitator for the program, I have also become responsible for considering how to co-create a welcoming, nurturing, and fertile space into which participants can plant their seeds of potential. The remainder of this chapter will explore how that space is created within the Ecology of Leadership. The program creates its foundation the first weekend through the introduction of specific key components, including the establishment of “core routines” to support individuals in developing a consistent practice, building the skeleton for the structure of the village, and beginning to weave the web of relationships together through activities that cultivate trust and bonding. These elements together are intended to
develop the optimum soil that will support individuals in their transformation and growth throughout the five months of the program and in their lives beyond.

**Core Routines**

One of the primary objectives during the first weekend of the Ecology of Leadership is to help participants establish a set of practices or “core routines” that will anchor them in their learning process. The hope is that these become regular, consistent practices that they adopt throughout the course of the program, and continue to use on an ongoing basis. As stated by Young et al. (2010), core routines

> work to condition the development of the brain toward a skill. First, inherited biological potential, stimulated by mental focus and emotional excitement, plus a little help from a mentor, forges a neuronal pathway. Then repetition reinforces it into a brain pattern or unconscious mental habit. (p. 23)

Schlitz et al. (2007) emphasize the value of the repetition of core practices in their research on transformation: “Part of practice is the building of new habits— it makes sense that you’ll need to engage in the process on a regular basis to reinforce them.” (p. 105). They cite Angeles Arrien, cultural anthropologist and transformation teacher, who says,

> In the transformation process, the tools need to be used daily, not just whether it’s [a] crisis, or things are working well or not. If I’m going to really maximize the change or the transformation process, I need to be working with my tools daily . . . or my practices daily. I don’t believe there’s really a change without practice. (p. 107)

Schlitz et al. also discuss the science behind core routines’ transformative power, referring to Markham and Greenough’s research on neuroplasticity—“the capacity of the connections between neurons in the brain to change in response to experience and our
environment” (2007, p. 106)—as evidence that developing new practices can help to reshape our brains and behaviors.

The concept of core routines as presented in the Ecology of Leadership comes directly from the Jon Young lineage of nature awareness education. Christopher and James met in part through their connection with Young, who was mentored by Tom Brown, Jr. (who claims to have been mentored by an Apache named Stalking Wolf, the story of which Brown tells in The Tracker). Young founded the Wilderness Awareness School, which Christopher Kuntzsch attended, as well as many other nature awareness education programs, including co-founding the Regenerative Design and Nature Awareness program at RDI together with his wife Nicole, James Stark, and Penny Livingston-Stark. Young introduces 13 “Core Routines of Nature Connection” in his book Coyote’s Guide to Connecting with Nature, of which a few were adapted by Kuntzsch and Stark for incorporation in EOL.

The primary core routines introduced in EOL include gratitude (Thanksgiving Address), intentions, journaling, and the sit spot. Michelle spoke to two of these as “core medicine” for the deep psychological wounding, disconnection, and dysfunctional behavior that she was experiencing prior to joining EOL:

I remember feeling absolutely immediately lit up by the Thanksgiving Address and by doing sit spots . . . those core practices. It was instantaneous . . . it was like, if they were people, I would have fallen in love and married them on the spot. . . . I had no edge or stuff come up around fulfilling that on a daily basis from that point on. It has sustained for six and a half years.

For many participants, the core routines become the primary anchor that supports them in integrating their healing and learning into a daily practice.

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5 The question of whether Stalking Wolf was a real person, or even really an Apache, is not confirmed. Regardless, the Tom Brown school of nature awareness is grounded in rigorous practices of deep nature connection and wilderness tracking.
In the following sections, I discuss the origins of each of these routines. Where relevant, I present comparative scholarship on these practices as they have been studied and used in other settings. I discuss the basic form of each practice and the way that it is introduced in EOL. I then present some of the data from participants regarding their adoption of the core routines. I focus on the two practices of gratitude and the sit spot, with a briefer discussion of the intentions and journaling practices.

**Gratitude**

Always begin with gratitude. This is the wisdom advice that comes to us from many of the world’s indigenous and contemplative teachings. (Levey, J. & M., 2011)

**Origins of the Thanksgiving Address**

The Thanksgiving Address, as originated by the Haudenosaunee people, is known as the Ohenton Karihwakehkwen, or “the words before all else.” It is a practice that traditionally is used at the beginning and end of each gathering, and also as a sunrise ceremony, in which one begins each day by giving thanks for each aspect of Creation—ranging from the people, to the insects, fish, plants, trees, birds, rocks, winds, thunder, sun, moon, stars, and so on. In voicing one’s thanks for each of these elements, it is a reminder of one’s relationship with the natural world and an honoring of life itself. From a Haudneosauanee perspective, “in thanking each life-sustaining force, one becomes spiritually tied to each of the forces of the Natural and Spiritual World” (Haudenosaunee NW, 2013). Together with the Great Law of Peace and the Creation Story, the Thanksgiving Address forms the backbone of the Haudenosaunee traditional law and
ecological knowledge. As the words of the Address state, it intends to bring the minds of the people who are gathering together as one.

In the Ecology of Leadership, beginning with gratitude is a foundational element of the program. The incorporation of this practice within EOL has its roots in the lineage of Chief Jake Swamp, a Haudenosaunee (Mohawk) who passed the teachings on to Jon Young, who in turn introduced it at the Wilderness Awareness School and in other nature awareness programs. According to Young et al. (2010):

Taking a moment to see the grace in elements of the natural world—frogs, rain, berries or the sun—deepens our relationships with each one. Thanksgiving reinforces the interdependence of all living things and their ground of being and reminds us of our kinship with nature. (p. 73)

For this reason, Young describes it as a core routine of nature connection—because it is a means for giving thanks for and honoring each element of the natural world.

**The Science of Gratitude**

The benefits of a regular gratitude practice are also increasingly being documented by the academic community. Dr. Robert Emmons (2004) from the University of California-Davis presents eight years of intensive research on gratitude in his best selling book, *Thanks! How The New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. He documents that a regular gratitude practice results in progress toward important personal goals; higher alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy; better health, sleep duration and sleep quality; greater energy, optimism and positive moods; and a greater sense of feeling connected to others. In “Understanding the Science of Gratitude,” Joel and Michelle Levy (2011) write,
The moment you shift from a mindstate of negativity or judgment to one of appreciation, there are immediate effects at many levels of your being: Brain function becomes more balanced, harmonized, and supple; your heart begins to pump in a much more coherent and harmonious rhythm; and biochemical changes trigger a host of healthful responses throughout your body. Especially in difficult times, remembering to return to gratitude is a radical life-affirming act that builds your capacity for resilience.

The Greater Good Science Centre at UC Berkeley recently launched a $5.6 million, 3-year research project, “Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude,” as part of which it is publishing articles on gratitude, organizing conferences, and collaborating with others to catalyze scholarship on this subject. One of the individuals that they cite as a leading figure in the “gratefulness” movement is Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk who writes about gratefulness being “the heart of prayer and a path to liberation” and “a way of healing oneself and society.” (Suttie, 2013). Steindl-Rast has helped to create a worldwide movement called the Network for Grateful Living, an online forum that even has a daily gratefulness “app” which helps people to remember to post a daily gratitude on their mobile phones.

Cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien recently published a book, Living in Gratitude (2011), in which she encourages the reader to make gratitude their focal point for a year. She writes, “Gratitude is a feeling that spontaneously emerges from within. However, it is not simply an emotional response; it is also a choice we make” (p. 3). This statement points to one of the important aspects of gratitude—as Steindl-Rast states, “Gratitude is the spontaneous response of a healthy body and mind to life” (Suttie, 2013). It arises naturally when we are feeling fully alive and connected to the world. However, it does not always come easily. Steindl-Rast continues on to say,

We should not expect it from a person who suffers in mind or body. With training, however, one can learn to focus on “opportunity” as the gift within every
given moment. This attitude towards life always improves the situation. Even in times of sickness, someone who habitually practices grateful living will look for the opportunity that a given moment offers and use it creatively.

Therefore, it is a practice that one can develop in order to reframe things in a positive light. Even in situations of profound sadness or difficulty, we can make a choice to live in gratitude. Some of the most grateful people I have ever met have been those living in extreme poverty or in difficult situations—in fact, in those contexts, it becomes even more essential.

I know this from personal experience, as I began practicing gratitude at a time of great difficulty in my life and found that I could always name something that I was grateful for—be it my healthy body, my breath, or even my life itself. This practice became a lifeline that helped sustain me through the challenge. In the 2012 TEDx talk that I gave on this topic, I named the following factors as positive benefits of a gratitude practice. First, it is an affirmation of life itself. Second, it turns our focus from the negative to the positive. Third, it is an opportunity for reframing—which gives us a new lens on life. And finally, it connects us to something greater than ourselves, and cultivates a sense of wonder and awe. Particularly when practiced in community, as each person in turn states what he or she is grateful for, it cumulatively builds a field of gratitude, which in my experience uplifts the hearts and spirits of the group, and helps to transform the space into one of positivity and connection. As the saying goes, “What we appreciate, appreciates.”

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6 To view my TEDx talk, The Transformative Power of Gratitude, visit: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VcN1kgN3el>.
The Practice of Gratitude in the Ecology of Leadership

Gratitude is the very first core routine that is introduced in the Ecology of Leadership, and it is repeated at the beginning of each day that the EOL program gathers. The application of the practice in the Ecology of Leadership is relatively straightforward. Once the participants have gathered, and are sitting in a circle, one of the members of the facilitation team helps to set the tone for the day. The participants then go around in a circle, each saying something that they are feeling grateful for in that moment. As in Indigenous sharing circles I have participated in, the instruction is to speak what arises spontaneously from your heart when it’s your turn, as opposed to preplanning what you will say. In this way, you can be present to listen fully to everyone else’s offerings. As the circle goes around, it is encouraged to affirm each participant’s gratitude with a verbal acknowledgement, such as “Aho,” or “Yes,” or “Ashe,” which expresses that you are also grateful for that thing, and helps to build the collective energy. When the circle is complete, a tradition that is used in EOL is to together “throw a blanket” of gratitude out into the world, to encompass all of the things that the group is grateful for, both that which has been spoken and that which is unspoken.

As it is one of the most transformative practices I have ever experienced, I considered writing my entire dissertation on the practice of gratitude. I decided against this, as I want to tell the more holistic story of transformation that happens through the Ecology of Leadership. But I state this to highlight how foundational and important gratitude is, both for me personally as well as for the program itself. Over the past 2.5 years, each of my meetings with my collaborators on the Ecology of Leadership team, every program day and each of the interviews and data collections sessions for this
research has begun with a round of gratitude. Its practice has therefore been a foundational element of my relational methodology, as a means to create and honor relationships with Spirit, with the natural world, and with one another.

**Participants’ Experiences with Gratitude**

As the first experience that many participants have in the Ecology of Leadership, the practice of gratitude makes a significant impression. Tim expressed having some familiarity with gratitude through his friends in the RDI community, but that witnessing it as a practice for the first time at EOL showed him how it was used to create a safe space for group process:

I had been in the presence of gratitude circles before and some of the containers used to start the programs and create oneness of mind. But my context had been being at a dinner party with the folks who had been through this community. So it was a little bit surreal to come and see how the container was created and be like, wow this is how they do everything. This is how we create space. That also felt good.

Several of the participants talked about how learning to practice gratitude on a daily basis has been transformative for them. Carl said, “Integrating gratitude into my daily life, yeah, it had a huge impact.” Regina talked about how gratitude helps her to connect with herself, and can change her day from bad to good:

It’s just a way to drop in. To start every day in that way has been totally transformative. Even if I feel really bad, if I take one moment outside and think about what I’m grateful for, then today’s good.

The power of gratitude to help reframe a challenging situation into something to be grateful for is a central aspect that participants highlighted. Carl shared how his perspective on this changed through EOL:
Before I came into EOL I would say I’d be searching for the things I’d be grateful for, things that are positive or good. Things like my health or it’s a sunny day or my son got an “A” on his exam. Going through the EOL program I realized that gratitude is not a judgment. That we can be grateful for things that at least on the surface may not sound good to the general public. Like the death of a parent.

Donna exemplified this during her interview, when we asked her to share something that she was feeling grateful for that day, and she named her husband’s flat tire:

I’m grateful for the flat tire my husband got last night, because it allowed us to spend some time together this morning and I got to drive him to work. And that’s very unusual for me to get to see him at all in the morning, so that was really an unexpected gift. I’m grateful for being able to see it that way as well. Also, as a result, I got to spend some time with my sons going to the tire store, so lots of good, male, family time. So that was pretty cool.

Carle also talked about how for her, gratitude is a practice of always looking for the best in a situation. When I asked her if she had practiced this prior to joining EOL, she said:

I think just the nature of who I am in the world is that I’m really looking for the silver lining and so, when things don’t go right, I’m always trying to find that deeper meaning, that deeper learning. And I feel like that’s what gratitude is about. It’s about looking for the things that exist in a situation, whatever it is, that are serving us . . . that are bringing us the gifts that we need. So yea, I did practice it, but I didn’t know that that’s what I was doing.

She spoke powerfully about the possibility of finding gratitude no matter how difficult the situation, referring to Viktor Frankl, who wrote *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946) after having survived a concentration camp in Nazi Germany:

There’s always something to be grateful for. I don’t care how crappy the situation is. And . . . you know Victor Frankl? Yea? I read that book maybe a year or two ago and I feel like that’s about gratitude. It’s like, you can be in a concentration camp, in the worst situation you can possibly think of, and the one thing that people can’t take away from you in how you choose to perceive it. And that’s gratitude right there.

Indeed, Frankl’s book is a testament to the power of gratitude, as he wrote the book not only after having been in the concentration camp but also after the death of his wife and
mother in those camps. The translation of the original title from the German, *Saying Yes to Life in Spite of Everything*, exemplifies this for me.

For Ericka, learning to focus on the positive by cultivating a gratitude practice helped her to decide to repair her marriage with her husband, from whom she had separated. By changing her perspective, she transformed their relationship:

I started to look on the good side of things, like being grateful. That’s definitely a big thing. Look towards what you’re grateful for. Don’t focus on what you’re not so grateful for. And even what you think is negative comes up to show you something. So you have to be grateful to that too. So I went back to him and then really embraced the relationship for the good and bad. And now basically our marriage is great and our relationship—we’ve been married for 11 years.

Ericka said that even though things can still be hard with her husband, having a daily or weekly gratitude practice has changed everything. Her gratitude practice continues many years after having completed EOL—each week she lists what she is grateful for at the top of the page in her weekly planner, so that she can keep this front and center, saying, “It changed my attitude in the day and during the week.” Jeff Z. also talked about how gratitude is a practice that he continues to actively cultivate in his daily life:

Yea, the role of gratitude . . . since EOL it’s become more a part of my daily practice I would say . . . Just sort of gratitude for life. Are you kidding me? It’s incredible. Look around. It’s so beautiful and terrible at the same time, but what a gift. And so it’s something that I have fallen back on a lot in my life in dark times. Just being grateful for the world and the universe and that it’s all so fascinating. . . it’s been great having EOL remind me that gratitude is a practice, it’s not just something you hold. Because there’s going to be times when you’re not feeling gratitude. There are times where I need to look for gratitude. Moments I would say. So having a regular practice of expressing gratitude to others is great.

When asked which of the practices she is still using from EOL, Regina did not mention gratitude at first. When we asked her if this is still a practice for her, she replied, “That might be number one. It’s just in there now, I forget. Yea, coming from gratitude has guided so much in my life.” James Stark, who was with me in the interview,
responded to her, saying, “Interesting how it becomes baseline, it becomes invisible.”

The concept of “baseline” comes from the nature awareness community, and refers to a natural system or being’s state of normalcy, when it is not in distress or experiencing a disturbance. Linking the concept of being in gratitude to being at baseline is aligned with Brother Steindl-Rast’s comment that “Gratitude is the spontaneous response of a healthy body and mind to life.” It is powerful to consider the suggestion that when we are in our most natural human state, it is one of gratitude.

Many participants talked about how they are continuing to utilize gratitude as a core routine long after the “program” is complete, both in their own lives as well as in their work with others. Regina shared how she does this both in meetings as well as each time she greets a new land or place:

I’ve used that practice, starting with gratitude, in almost every type of meeting that’s important. I use it every time I arrive somewhere new and I’m going out on the land. . . . I do it internally with some people, but with certain people, as soon I get out to go on a hike, it’s like, okay what are we grateful for? And kind of asking permission of the land, so getting really in touch with the land in that way. And that has changed everything.

Michelle spoke about her own personal practice of gratitude on a daily basis and her use of it in group leadership:

When I say it whether I say it loud or quieter, morning or night . . . usually I’ll do it aloud outside in the morning, sometimes it’ll be silent . . . But when I do it in groups when other people are contributing, that’s different and even more powerful.

Ericka also uses it in her work as an Associate Director with an organization called Marin Grassroots, saying that when she is working in communities, “Usually when I ask people to introduce themselves I ask, ‘Can we share one thing we are grateful for?’”
Although I had found gratitude on my own prior to EOL, I adopted it as a consistent practice during the program. In August 2011, after having completed EOL-8 as a participant in June, I deepened my commitment by beginning a daily online gratitude practice on Facebook. For the better part of a year, I posted something that I was grateful for every day. This was a powerful way to be witnessed by a community (over 1500 Facebook “friends”) and to hold myself accountable. Knowing that I had to show up for that practice and find something to write about each day transformed the way I saw the world. Everywhere I looked I began to notice more and more things I felt grateful for. Soon I was moving through each day filled with an overflowing feeling of gratitude and appreciation. As written in my post on September 27, 2011,

37/365—I’M ALIVE

I am so grateful to be ALIVE!!!! Grateful to live in beautiful Berkeley, California, grateful for Yoga to the People, grateful for Café Gratitude!, grateful for the sunshine, grateful for joy and trust and presence and love in the midst of total not knowing and uncertainty, grateful to feel my heart, grateful for my body, grateful for smiling, grateful for the energy of living in an alive urban centre, grateful for views of the bay and redwoods and roses and birdsong, grateful for flowing work and new opportunities, grateful to be living on my edges…wow—just OVERFLOWING with gratitude today!!! (see picture…about to burst! )

As I shared with one participant in an interview, “One of the things about gratitude, is that the more you practice it the more

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7 To view the full record of those posts, visit: <http://solgratitude.wordpress.com>.
you start to notice more things to be grateful for and the more you’re more grateful for things.”

This practice was transformative not just for me, but also for others who witnessed it. It was rewarding to receive a message from someone halfway around the world who had been reading my gratitude posts and been moved by them, or from others who decided to take on their own gratitude practice. On a small level, it had a “viral” effect– with others also numbering and posting their gratitude on Facebook as I had done. It also influenced my children as I began to integrate this practice into my days with them. We practice it in the mornings on the way to school, before meals, and in gatherings with friends. Once when stuck in traffic on our way to a Thanksgiving dinner, my children, ages 3 and 6 at the time, amazed me as we spent 45 uninterrupted minutes sharing what we were grateful for. Even in the writing of this dissertation, my father read a draft of this chapter, and then reported the next day that he had started a gratitude practice.

Just as the Haudenosaunee describe gratitude as being a practice for tying oneself to Spirit, participants affirmed a direct connection between gratitude and their spirituality, including their sense of connection to the natural world and all beings. Lauren, who is an ordained minister and is now the Dean of the Chaplaincy Institute, said, “Gratitude is one of the best ways I pray.” Carle affirmed this, saying: “Gratitude, shoot, I love gratitude. It’s…talk about bringing you into the present moment. It’s always there for us. And you know, some people might call it God. That faith. Yea, so, I love it.”

Tim summarized the importance of the core routine of gratitude in the Ecology of Leadership with the following statement:
If you’re not practicing great gratitude, you’re by default either not thankful or unthankful . . . if you find yourself not living in gratitude and not feeling thankful, like anything else, practices are a really great way to remind yourself. To me, that practice to stop for a minute and look around this amazing world. Look at these amazing people. Think about the food you just ate, and the birds that flew by and the ocean you can hear. All that’s happening all the time. Get out of the mind and take a moment to experience what the heck is going around you, which is a magical world. Sometimes you need someone to remind you. To me gratitude is…to live in gratitude, to really get it in your bones, requires a ritual. And to start for me was having a group of people say we’re going to do gratitude.

Tim points to a very important aspect of gratitude—getting “out of the mind” to become present to the magic that is all around. It is a common saying that “In a human’s life, the longest journey is the journey between the head and the heart” (anonymous). In my experience, one of the greatest powers of gratitude is helping to make that connection between the mind and the heart, and thereby to cultivate a state of presence and being that is optimal for healing and transformation to take place.

**Intentions**

The practice of setting intentions came to EOL together with the core routine of the Thanksgiving Address, from Christopher Kuntzsch’s experience at the Wilderness Awareness School. However, the setting of intentions is not unique to the Ecology of Leadership program. It is also practiced in many of the circles and programs that are common in the various communities of the Great Turning. It can be related, for example, to the work of the Landmark Forum (in which both EOL founders have participated), regarding the power to shape one’s reality, or even to popular books such as The Secret that talk about the individuals’ power to manifest what they want through intention.

In *Living Deeply*, Schlitz et al. (2007), designate intention as the first essential element of a transformative practice. They write,
While it is true that transformative experiences... often seem to arise spontaneously, one of the elements that determines whether or not they take root is the intention you hold toward personal growth and transformation. It’s an interesting paradox: even though transformation is a natural process—one that you primarily need to recognize and surrender to—it also requires making the choice, each moment of the day, to be in greater alignment with who you are at your core. (p. 93)

A delicate balance is described in this quotation, of both letting go and surrendering to transformation as a natural process at the same time as holding an intention for growth and the actualization of your greatest self. An important aspect that they also highlight is that intention setting empowers the participant to co-create their experience—“With intention, it’s almost as though you become a coconspirator in your own evolution, as opposed to being dragged through it kicking and screaming” (Schlitz et al., 2007, p. 94).

In the Ecology of Leadership, the collective setting of intentions immediately follows the gratitude circle. After the circle has been completed, the generation of so much appreciation and positivity seems to create a high vibrational field, which cultivates a “fertile soil” for creativity. Into this space, the EOL instructors then invite the group to bring forward their intentions for the weekend together. Individuals are asked to share intentions both for their own experience as well as for the whole group. More often than not, the intentions are expressed in the form of one-word qualities or short phrases, such as “love,” “curiosity,” “deep listening,” “compassion,” or “vulnerability.” In smaller circles, or when more time permits, individuals may be invited to share more fully about their intentions. Regardless of the format, the weaving together of intentions, both personal and collective, often lasts for quite some time, until it feels like a complete picture has been painted of what the group intends to experience.
Whereas the gratitude circle tends to leave the participants with a feeling of joy and elation, the intention setting often carries a feeling of anchoring and grounding. The intentions set the course and direction. When used in the EOL program, they help the group co-create the day or weekend, and help the facilitation team to get a pulse for the state of the group and what individuals are hoping to experience over the weekend. As a personal practice, they play the same role of helping one to get clear about what it is that he or she wants to experience, be it in a particular project, a meeting, or in a day.

Kyle gave a vivid description of how setting intentions during his first weekend of EOL supported him in awakening to his responsibility in his own transformative process:

The whole beginning of gratitude, intentions . . . felt like I was beginning a sacred process of really connecting with who I am and what I’m all about. What I’m capable of. Really taking that seriously. And it was very empowering for someone to be like what are you grateful for? What are your intentions? And to create that presence. It just brought me to the moment. Okay. Here we are. I’m in the driver’s seat. I’m totally part of this. Whoa. It felt like an awakening in some ways.

Lauren also spoke about how setting intentions has helped her to shift her perspective on what she wants to achieve, and how to get there:

And finding ways to put my heart’s desire in the affirmative instead of the, oh no, oh my god, I’m so worried about . . . That’s been really transformational and an important tool.

For many of the participants, this practice has been continued in their lives beyond EOL. Together with her weekly gratitude, Ericka also records an intention for her week. She said that with this practice, “I don’t think only so much about what I have to do, but I also put that intention of how I want to be that week.” For Jeff Z., the practice of setting intentions has become inherent to how he lives his life, and he is recognized by others for this capacity:
Even if I don’t verbally set intentions prior to some activity or space or community, then really thinking about intentions and having a lot of intention and holding those intentions as I go about a task, a project, anything . . . has been really rich, especially last summer. I remember having some interactions with people. Somebody actually saying, I love how you’re so intentional about the thing that we’re doing. Well, I know where I got that. It’s from EOL.

Like gratitude, setting intentions has become a core routine for me, a habit and practice that is almost as essential as sleeping, eating or exercise. I strive to begin each morning by setting intentions. The setting of intentions does not mean a rigid setting of a plan or expectations for certain outcomes—rather, it is a practice of bringing forward of qualities with which I can then infuse my day, while remaining open to whatever it is that might unfold. I find it is most powerful to do that practice with someone else, so that we collectively encourage each other to do the practice, and support one another in those intentions. I also incorporate it in my engagements in community and the work that I do in the world— each time that I gather with others, be it for an EOL leadership team meeting or for my birthday celebration, we start by sharing both our gratitude and our intentions for our time together.

As stated by Schlitz et al. (2007), continuing to practice core routines or even just to be in a transformative process is not always easy. They write,

As we’ve seen, transformative practice isn’t always easy or enjoyable. In fact, it’s often tough for people to stick to. Like any other repeated practice (and like life itself), moments of the sublime or the deeply profound are interspersed with boredom, discomfort, and the unfamiliar. Often our commitment wavers. It is deep, strong, pure intention that rekindles it. (p. 96)

Intentions can be the commitment or glue that anchors one in a particular direction, and can also seed the possibility for a particular quality of experience. For,

Intention not only fuels the transformative process through commitment, it also imbues actions with transformative potential. In other words, bringing strong
intention to any constructive action can make that action transformative. (Schlitz et al., 2007, p. 96)

Although the setting of intentions on an ongoing basis itself requires discipline and commitment, my experience is that taking extra time out of my day to set intentions has the potential to change the nature of my reality, just by focusing my attention in a particular direction. It is generative.

**Journaling**

The third core practice of the Ecology of Leadership is journaling. Not a lot of time is spent introducing this in the program. It is assumed that most people are familiar with journaling as a practice. For some participants, it is already well established as a core routine, but for others EOL may be the first time that they take it on.

Journaling is used in the program in two ways. First, on program days participants are asked to journal during specific activities or instruction blocks, as a means for reflecting on the content being delivered and their own experiences in relation to specific questions that are posed by the instructors. Second, participants are asked to cultivate a daily journaling practice for the five months that the program spans. They are given extremely low-bar goals for this—for example, 3 words a day for the first month of the program, then 5 the next month, then 7, and so on. The journaling can also include visual representations, such as drawing, painting, doodling, or even the use of technological through online applications such as “Day One.”

It is suggested that participants may choose to journal what it is they are grateful for each day to reinforce the gratitude core routine. Elyse talked about the value of bringing these two core routines together for her:
I was good at journaling. I kept that up. And it wasn’t so much the journaling, but everyday, however many words we were challenged to write, I would try to write that many things I was grateful for. So, I really felt . . . you know, just focusing on the gratitude, because you know, some days it’s not the best day and so, you can kind of journal all about it, and then ending with what I’m grateful for can help with that mind shift.

Most participants who take on the journaling end up doing much more than the required word minimum, although it was not clear from the interviews what percentage of participants follow through with the journaling on a daily basis. I have kept a journal since a young age, so the practice was not new for me. However, what I learned from EOL was a more conscious process of “tracking”—a concept that again stems from the nature awareness community. As described by Young et al. (2010):

_**Questioning and Tracking in a Nutshell:**_  

Whereas Young’s description is referring to tracking patterns in the natural world—literally tracking an animal or learning about a bird’s patterns and behaviors, the Ecology of Leadership process refers to tracking one’s own patterns and behaviors. As various aspects of the curriculum are introduced, more pieces are added to the tracking—for example, tracking one’s judgments, or use of time, or commitments. At EOL the journaling process is not just a matter of recording what happened in a day or one’s feelings, but the observation and tracking of one’s own inner world. This routine cultivates awareness, mindfulness and self-knowledge that in turn supports the transformative process.
Sit Spot

The primary nature connection core routine in the Ecology of Leadership is known as the “sit spot.” Also introduced to EOL from the Jon Young school of nature awareness, the concept of the sit spot is to choose a place outdoors where the participant sits on a regular basis and observes the natural world. Young et al. (2010) describe the practice as follows:

*Sit Spot in a Nutshell:*
Find one place in the natural world that you visit all the time and get to know as your best friend. Let this be a place where you learn to sit still—alone, often, and quietly—before you playfully explore beyond. This will become your place of intimate connection with nature. (p. 36)

They proceed to say, “Sit Spot is the core of the Core Routines and the heart of this mentoring model. It’s the magic pill if ever there was one” (p. 37).

Although the sit spot is attributed by Young to his training with Tom Brown Jr., it is a practice that also appears in other nature-based education and Indigenous communities. I first encountered the sit spot during my work with Rediscovery International, an Aboriginal organization based in Canada. According to Rediscovery co-founder Thom Henley, it originated in the Haida Gwaii community in 1978, and was originally called “Wanagan Time,” after a Haida man who introduced it. Wanagan Time was changed to “Spirit Spot” by Henley when publishing the Rediscovery manual in 1989 (personal communication, June 6, 2013). Regardless of the name or origin, its intention is to help individuals develop a quiet, close relationship with the natural world through intimate observation and a regular practice of immersion. As Young et al. write, it is an opportunity for participants to “meet nature as their home” (p. 37).
The Practice of the Sit Spot in the Ecology of Leadership

After the gratitude and intentions circle is complete, some basic exercises are introduced to help participants open their senses to the world around them. The concepts of “owl eyes” (softening one’s vision to observe the world in full periphery) and “fox walking” (learning to walk lightly and with awareness on the land) are introduced. The group is then guided down to the land that lies across the road from Commonweal Garden, an expansive field that runs right into the Pacific Ocean. Each individual finds their way into a meadow lined with towering Eucalyptus and filled with birdlife, cows, deer, insects, and other creatures. One by one, participants sink down into their own private sit spot location. Depending on the season, the grasses may be so tall that the whole group disappears into the landscape. After 20–30 minutes, the group is summoned by an echo call made to sound like a crow and walks silently back to the property. Often the sit is followed by a group debrief in the yurt, in which participants share stories of what they observed and experienced, in both the external landscape and their own internal space. This practice is repeated on the Sunday of each program weekend at dawn to enable participants to witness the morning chorus of birds and the waking up of the land as the sun rises. The early morning grasses are often kissed by glistening drops of dew, a phenomenon recalled by both Carle and Ericka.

I remember there was a particular day where I went out and I was so taken by the dew drops on all the plants. It was just so beautiful and there was something about how cleansing it was for the earth and then I remember coming back and so many people shared experiences of the dew and it was just so lovely to know that we were all in our own place but seeing the same thing.—Carle

I was coming back from this sit-spot. And everyone’s silent as you know. And it was the end of winter because it starts in February. End of winter, beginning of spring. Very early we would go to the sit-spot. And I would come back and I saw the whole dew on the grass and there’s a Brazilian song that says like “I’m going
to pave the streets with diamonds for my love to pass through”—first it was just a beautiful thing, the rays of sun.. And I then thought “what a kind act of love they’re doing” . . . to pave these streets with beautiful diamonds. Beautiful precious things that were there already. And to open that space and see that—to realize that—it’s beautiful—Ericka

The core routine of the sit spot also intertwines with the Thanksgiving Address. Many participants talked about how their sit spot experience feeds directly into their gratitude practice on a daily basis. Donna gave an example of this when asked to share what she was feeling grateful for at the beginning of our interview:

This morning when I was out on the deck, having my sit spot. There was a lemon tree, a little miniature lemon tree. And it’s just bursting with blossoms right now and the scent is amazing. And the little bees are just happy just in their whole bee-ness, buzzing around there. It made me realize how grateful I am for the bees and for the honey they provide, that I put in my coffee every morning.

To establish this as a core routine at home, participants are instructed to choose a sit spot nearby (like Donna’s deck), where they can sit for at least 20 minutes per session, five days a week. During the sit, the participants are encouraged to develop a relationship with the landscape through quiet observation, attention and presence. It is suggested not to journal or do a closed-eyed meditation, but to just be with the land. It is intentionally called a “sit” spot, not a walk, or other kind of outdoor nature connection activity, as evidence shows that a different kind of experience opens up through the act of sitting in one place. For example, it takes about 20 minutes following a disturbance (e.g. the participant walking into his or her spot) for the ecology to return to baseline so that the participant can observe the birds and animals in their natural state of behavior, or those that might have been scared away entirely as he or she first approached. Scientific research demonstrates that it also takes this long for our human bodies and brains to slow down and begin to achieve our own natural baseline.
Ecology of Leadership participants talked about this slowing down happening for them on both a physical level and a more internal level. Regina said, “Slowing down and going to sit spot definitely helped me just get centered and connect into my self. Of course, that was a baseline.” Carle also talked about the experience of slowing down, and how the nature of the sit spot enabled this in contrast to previous outdoor experiences:

Having a core routine like sit spot really helped me to slow down and pay attention in a different way. And to notice that it’s a very different experience to be going through a hike through nature and be talking to someone while you’re doing that, than it is to sit by yourself in calm and just let whatever comes come, and be paying special attention to your senses and what are you smelling and tasting and feeling in your body, and seeing and hearing.

Susan also discussed how the sit spot felt like a new level of nature connection, in which she experienced being held by the greater landscape:

Sit spots. I really loved that practice and I still do it. I think up until that point I had spent time in nature and definitely liked being solo in nature. But there’s something about the practice of just sitting and being the land and nature unfolding around me really helped me to tune into myself and my own personal process . . . just being able to sit with myself and be with nature and just surrender everything and just feel like I’m just this little part of everything, and they are just holding me. The sky was holding me, and it’s all okay.

**Tracking the Inner Landscape**

In the above statements, the participants highlight the role of the sit spot in cultivating their own connection to self and inner awareness. This highlights an important distinction about the sit spot core routine as it is utilized in the Ecology of Leadership—whereas in the traditional nature awareness context it is introduced primarily as a practice for observing the external landscape—animals, birds, winds, insects, etc., in EOL the sit spot places an equally strong focus on the participant’s awareness and observation of his or her “internal landscape,” and on the interplay between the outer and the inner. Rather
than diligently recording bird language patterns or looking for animal tracks, participants
are encouraged to just notice what arises. Tim talked about this comparison to his
experiences from other nature awareness courses:

[I like] the simplicity of the way EOL introduces the sit spot, which is just go out
in nature and sit. You don’t have to do anything else. You don’t have to figure out
what the animals are doing. You don’t have to uncover the secrets of the universe.
You can just go out there and sit. It can be in the city. It can be anywhere. Just be
with the world that’s happening all the time, all around you. Just pay attention to
it. There was a simplicity to it for me and it actually worked really well for me.

The intention of the sit spot in EOL is to cultivate a deeper awareness of and
connection with one’s own internal landscape at the same time as connecting with and
observing the natural world. For many participants, this means having a space to connect
with their “bigger body” and to remember that as humans, we are also part of nature.

Ericka talked about having this realization:

I was so amazed and even emotional about the connection with nature. I never
really took time to sit 20 minutes by myself with nature and not say anything and
be only observing, and really feel that connection that’s like “hey I’m part of
this.” I’d think about it . . . But to feel it was completely different. Really “Wow.”

Kyle also discussed having a powerful realization about being a part of nature and of the
whole universe being within him—a universal “baseline presence”:

I was at a sit spot . . . and it just hit me. It was like this wave of relaxation. It was
like, you already . . . you’ve got it all right now. Stop trying. Stop trying to
outthink it and make it . . . you are it. It’s present, it’s alive, it’s living. It allowed
me to soften into myself and tap into my own intelligence. And it just, it began
this journey and this wave of bliss that I’m still riding today. And it’s beautiful—
the way they teach things, my universe is myself. The universe is within you. That
divine baseline presence is within all things. And you can touch it and feel it . . .
And that can be your guide, that connection . . . EOL really sparked that . . .
maybe there’s something beyond that, but all these ancient teachings saying the
same thing is like, to me that’s it. It’s like letting nature do what it wants and
being conscious awareness of that. The power of nature that’s in you.
In incorporating the sit spot at home, it is suggested that the participant return to the same spot on a consistent basis, so that they can develop a deepening relationship with that particular location and ecosystem and see it change over time. For this reason, it is recommended that the sit spots be close to the home or workplace, as it is better that the spot be easy to access (e.g. one’s front stoop, even in an urban center) than in a more ideal/“wild” location that is harder to reach and therefore less likely to be visited on a consistent basis. Carol talked about doing her sit spot at home in the urban center of San Jose, California:

Having the practice as part of the class to go and do a sit spot was a real struggle at first, because I literally live in 3 freeways here in San José. It’s very loud, it’s very city, there’s telephone wires cutting right through my backyard, you can hear the freeway going all the time. And I don’t normally notice it that much because I’m inside, but when I’m sitting outside during rush hour in the morning trying to do a sit spot, like, it’s really, it’s a challenge to feel like I’m in nature. Right?

Ericka also talked about doing her sit spot at home in the city, but talked about how she was able to transform her relationship with her land through the practice:

To really look out the window and see the world in a different way. The tree that’s by my house looks different. My backyard that’s so tiny became a forest. Because I did sit spots in my backyard.
When I first participated in the Ecology of Leadership, I was living in Guelph, Ontario, Canada, in a brand new subdivision where my backyard was a tiny square of grass facing out onto a barren “wildlife corridor,” which translated as a 25 foot wide strip of old logs and tiny tree plantings that were separating the two rows of new-build homes (See Figure 5.4). I remember going outdoors at night, in February, in my snow pants, jacket, hat, gloves, and boots just to do my sit. I found a way to interact with the landscape—the cold night air on my face, the bright stars above. But it was challenging for me to feel deeply nature connected in that barren setting. I also found a sit spot that was a bit further off, by the river (see Figure 5.5), which was beautiful but a 10 minute drive—thus I faced the challenge described earlier: it was too far to go on a regular basis.

When I moved to California, I intentionally sought out a home where I would be inspired to practice my sit spot daily. The vision for my home actually came to me during a sit spot. I will share that story in Figure 5.4 – My backyard in Guelph, Ontario

Figure 5.5 – My “wild” sit spot on the Grand River in Guelph
a later chapter—but the heart of it was to have a home in an environment that would be deeply nature connected, for my children’s benefit as well as for myself. Within 24 hours of having that vision, I was signing a lease for my current home, which borders the beautiful Tilden Regional Park. Here, it is hard not to have a sit spot on a daily basis—I just step outside and am immersed in the wild. I often sit on my deck just to listen to the birds, or I can wander an extra twenty feet down to the meditation platform (see Figure 5.6). I am still developing my relationship with the sit spot—but this is the magic of it—our knowledge of, and relationship with, the natural world continually unfolds and deepens, just as with ourselves and with one another. The important thing is to develop the sit spot as a core routine, which becomes as natural as having breakfast in the morning.

**Core Routines Summarized**

Of the many practices that are introduced throughout the course, these four form the “core routines” of EOL—gratitude, intentions, journaling, and the sit spot. Together they help anchor the individual participants on a daily basis while they are in the program, and beyond. In the next chapter, I will discuss the formation of the village—the structures that
are introduced in the first weekend, and the web of support that is woven to help participants transform within a community setting.
CHAPTER SIX: BUILDING THE VILLAGE

One of the most important intentions for the first weekend of the Ecology of Leadership is to help “build the village,” or create the means for connection amongst the participants that will support and sustain them in their process throughout the program. This section will discuss how the “container,” or a safe space in which growth and healing can occur, is created. I begin by presenting the formal structures and tiers of support that help make up the EOL village. I examine the role of the circle, and the multi-layered levels of organization designed to support participants in the program. Following this, I describe a few of the activities that help the group to bond and develop trust, including an activity called presencing and determining a shared set of agreements. I close by briefly discussing other aspects that help to build the village culture on the first weekend.

Village Structure

The Ecology of Leadership village is designed to be an integrated web of support. On the one hand, the whole village is together in one circle, and all of the individuals who are sitting in the circle are intended to be in a mutually supportive relationship with one another. At the same time, there are also multi-layered tiers or rings of support built in to ensure that everyone’s needs are met. Before moving into a description of the multi-layered levels of support and organization that help make up the EOL village, I want to first discuss the broader concept of the “circle.”
The Circle

In EOL, the circle is one of the most important and primary features of the journey. “The circle” is a term that is used to refer to the whole of the EOL village, inclusive of all of the members, ranging from first time participants to the leadership team. It is also the overarching form and operating structure that defines the village’s organization and functioning. Each time that the group gathers, be it as a whole or in small groups, it is in a circle. Whether it is around the fire, or in the yurt, or in small breakout groups on the land, everything happens in circle form.

The use of the circle is a conscious choice to return to a more holistic and inclusive system of organization, rather than using the mainstream hierarchical educational model of sitting in rows. It is also a way of being with one another that creates the opportunity for collective healing and new possibilities to emerge. Macy and Johnstone (2012) write, “Circles of fellowship create space for a different story to be heard, spoken, and lived. By providing a protected space to share our concerns and sprout new responses, they serve as seedbeds for the Great Turning” (p. 129).

In many of the emerging models of transformative education for the Great Turning, the circle has reemerged as the framework for coming together in that work.

Indigenous cultures around the world have long used the circle as a key organizing principle. Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano (2000) describes how the form of the circle includes all aspects of creation, saying, “The circle, representing the circle of life, contains all experience, everything in the biosphere—animal, vegetable, mineral, human, spirit—past, present, and future” (p. 30). Brian Luke Seaward (2011) also talks about the power of the circle, writing:
The circle is known the world over as a powerful divine symbol of wholeness, where all parts come together to form a whole, yet, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. Wisdom keepers and sages remind us of the power of the circle, an archetypal symbol of wholeness; the Tibetan mandala, the Native American medicine wheel, and the African drum, now used in so many cultures.

The idea that the circle both is inclusive of all of its constituents and also develops it own unique character and being through the coming together of the whole is a key concept in EOL.

Many participants talk about how the circle is one of the most significant aspects of the journey for them. Whereas other programs may focus primarily on personal development and the individual’s process, being in a circle of people who are committed to a collective journey over a period of five months is one of the distinguishing features of EOL. A kind of healing and also action becomes possible that is greater than that available to the individual. Tim talked about the importance of the circle in EOL:

The facilitators do a really good job making the circle a priority. It’s more important than the agenda, it’s more important than what you have to cover that day. What’s most important is: can we get a group of people together that are operating from a space of oneness of mind, that are very, very present, that are connecting in a powerful way to their heart, to their real person— and create strong ropes between them. When that happens, healing and the creativity come naturally. . . . So for me, that’s what the circle was. It was a place to come together and a space of trust and human relationships. It was like, wow: I have allies here. These folks care just as much about my journey as their own. I feel like I’m in my tribe, I’m in my community. And that container is what facilitates for me what is rapid healing . . . because you’ve got the collective hearts and collective minds of a group of people with wide experiences. And all of a sudden, you have . . . the wisdom of 40 human beings who have lived on this Earth for anywhere between 20 to 60 years. So the collective genius of this group, the collective heart all of a sudden becomes really powerful. The container is it.

As I describe the other layers of support and organization within the EOL village, the circle will remain as the overarching framework in which the other aspects are contained.

One way to conceptualize this is as a basket, with a series of concentric “rings” of
structure, which weave together to form the whole of the circle. The rings, from the outside in, are: the leadership team, the facilitation path, the participants, the pods, and the buddies, with the individual at the very center.

**Leadership Team**

At the outermost ring sits the core leadership and instruction team. This was comprised of James and Christopher at the time of my research and now includes me. This ring holds the overarching vision for the program, the primary design of the curriculum and process, the majority of the facilitation and instruction of content, and holds and cares for all of the individuals who sit within the other rings.

**Facilitation Path**

Within the leadership ring sits a circle called the “facilitation path,” made up of roughly 6 alumni who have chosen to come back to EOL to serve and develop their facilitation skills. These individuals have as a primary task to be in a role of service, supporting the participants and holding the circle energetically with their love and presence. They meet with the leadership team throughout each weekend, participating in the design and shaping of the course as it unfolds. They facilitate certain aspects of the curriculum, and now also each hold a “pod,” a small group structure. Together, the leadership team and those on the facilitation path make up the “facilitation team.” Regina talked about her experience of giving back and learning to hold the circle while at the same time transforming and being held:

> It was really powerful joining the facilitation team. One because the facilitation team is also really held and holding each other and there for each other. The
model is brilliant of just how this circle works, and that the circle of leadership is nurturing each other and themselves in the same way that they’re nurturing the circle. And so there’s just an amazing modeling going on. And I think that it just felt so good to give, to give and support what I had been through myself that I’m so passionate about. And I knew it was such a gift to give to the world. So just stepping into that felt amazing and it felt like a ride for me myself. It was full of healing and I think that’s how it always is now that I’ve been more in a mentoring role. . . . Like I’m going through my own little rite of passage as I’m helping someone through theirs. And it’s often related holding space for others while I’m always on my edge too and always learning . . . the facilitation path felt like a whole other level of learning and deepening of this practice and this work, while watching and guiding people through and holding people.

Individuals who join the facilitation team have the opportunity to both develop their skills in holding the basket as well as to feel themselves held by the greater community in their own ongoing development and learning.

Participants
Inside of the next ring sits the group of individuals who are participants, most of whom are in the program for the first time, but includes those who have chosen to join for a second round of the program.

Pods
At the next level of differentiation are the “pods,” or small groups of 5–6 participants who ideally live geographically close to one another. These groups remain consistent throughout the program so that they can support one another in the integration of learning in their local communities. This level of support was introduced in April 2012, and is one of the primary transformative elements within EOL that has resulted from this research project. The idea for the pods came out of my interview with Jill, who had been a member of the facilitation path. When asked about her experience on the
facilitation team, she made a comment that sparked a generative conversation between us:

As a facilitator, it took me four weeks before I had a sense of who each person in the circle was. And I can imagine in a larger circle, that would be even harder . . . I would’ve liked to be assigned 4 people or something like that.—Jill

Interesting idea. I like that idea. I really like that . . . each facilitator is keeping track of these people so nobody falls through the cracks.—Katia

They wouldn’t even have to know it!—Jill

Or they could be explicitly reaching out, if there’s a sensing that this person might need some extra support.—Katia

We did that.—Jill

But if you know your people, or these 5 people, this could be explicit. You’re assigned a particular facilitator . . . at least that the facilitators know. . . “Okay, I’m keeping an eye on these 5 people,” that then there could be . . . it’s almost like a buddy system upgrade, you’ve also got a facilitator buddy. Maybe once in the month between circles you connect with your facilitator buddy, even just an e-mail or something, so that there’s a thread. I like that, because sometimes in the buddy relationship, if one person isn’t being accountable to the relationship, not showing up, that person can feel isolated, like totally left out there, so if you know you’ve got another thread, and this thread and this thread, you’ve got more to hold onto. I really like that.—Katia

I think some people are a little bit intimidated by reaching out to the facilitation team.—Jill

Right, but if there’s explicit relationship established, then maybe that one stays consistent. So the buddies change every month, but the whole time that you’re in the group, you stay with your one facilitator, unless there’s something that’s not working. I really like that. Hm. Upgrade! That’s great.—Katia

As demonstrated in that conversation, the vision for creating what became known as the “pods” was to build in an additional layer of support for the participants—more “threads” of the web to help strengthen the village. After that interview, I brought this idea directly to Christopher and James, and even though the EOL-9 group was mid-program, we piloted the pods with that circle mid-process. We took the idea of each
facilitator being assigned to 5–6 people and instead of making that a one-on-one relationship between just the facilitator and the participant, made it a small group that could also support one another. A year later, we are in our third circle of using the pods system, and it has become a critical support structure that solidly helps to hold the village together between the weekends. As pods are geographically organized, they often meet in person between the weekends, and have also gone so far as to develop pod names (e.g. Allies with Owl Eyes), create “regalia” (official dress), and to support one another with their projects between the months and after the program ends.

**Buddies**

The final level of support is called “buddies,” or one-on-one pairs designed to meet throughout the months in between program weekends. The participants receive their buddies on the first weekend, through a process of picking names from a hat. This process is repeated each month, with the buddy pairs switching, so that by the end of the program each person will have had four different buddies. The rationale for the changing of buddies is so that participants have more surface area with different people within the village, and get to practice implementing their EOL tools as applied to one-on-one interpersonal relationships with diverse individuals. This encourages individuals to learn to collaborate and build relationships with different kinds of people, just as they would in a village, which then ideally transfers to increasing participants’ capacity to apply their EOL tools to diverse relationships in their home communities.

Participants are asked to have weekly check-ins with their buddies, supporting one another with accountability around their core routines, their projects, and the
integration of the EOL curriculum and process in their lives. Buddies have been part of the program since the first EOL circle, and appeared in the research data as a transformative element for many of the participants. Tim talked about how having a buddy was a great way to practice what he was learning in the program:

You have your buddies, so you get to do the day-to-day work that you’re doing outside of circle. . . . Having a companion that helps you with that is really, really great if you use it and take advantage of it.

Kyle also talked about how the buddies helped him to integrate what he was learning and stay committed on a weekly basis:

It was really powerful to have somebody to call every week to really download and process our experience, because I think without that the teachings would get lost more easily. . . . During the program, that’s what creates the integration of the teachings. And it reinforces that. . . I know when I was home, I would be hitting walls or whatever, I would just be having trouble with staying true to myself or staying on the routine, doing sit spots . . having someone who is on the same journey, it creates a strong bond. It’s like when people are overweight and they want to work out. A workout buddy. You need a buddy to help you out. They keep each other focused. So that to me is absolutely essential.

The buddy relationship is designed in part to be a training ground, in which some of the content and principles introduced in the program can be applied in an interpersonal context. Tim went on to talk about how the buddy system helped him to develop that capacity of practicing building a new way of being in relationship with someone:

It just felt like I was always getting the buddy that I needed…It was a great way to build friendships. It was great to have a mirror, because when you get a buddy, you love everybody, but you love your buddy a little bit more. It’s just the way it is. And it’s a deeper level of trust. And to have that really another hour or two in a week to just blend in with somebody, somebody that you know is there to listen to and you can listen to as well and have a container to provide support for each other and practice. Practice a new way of communicating. Wow, we can offer gratitude any time we have a conversation. I want to get into the habit, if someone tells me what’s going on, wow gosh, I want to ask them how I can support them. So, it starts all of a sudden you’re outside of program and no one’s watching you do this, but you’ve got a practice partner. We’re calling forth a new way of communicating, a new way of practicing compassion, a new way of creating a
strong container for a real connection to happen. So those are all new tools and the buddy partnership is a great way to start bringing those to life. And again, you’re not watched. It’s up to you. So it’s like a practice of real life.

Susan also talked about how the buddy relationship helped her to develop new skills of being in relationship, specifically through the practice of being witnessed:

Having the buddy check-ins, especially in the beginning. It was almost like a life-line for me. Knowing that there was someone that I could be talking to every week and that I could just share my process and what was going on and be witnessed.

Many participants spoke about how their buddy relationship challenged them or called them forward. Because the buddies are picked randomly, people often end up paired with individuals with whom they may not have naturally gravitated to connect with outside of the program. Being asked to consciously be in relationship with whomever your buddy happens to be for the month gives the opportunity for participants to practice interpersonal relationships. As Lauren said, “Buddies run deep. . . . I know they can also be total triggers. And then they run deep too.” Regina spoke to how her buddies taught her to be more truthful in confronting challenge or conflict in relationship:

The buddy system’s challenging and it was also really good medicine for me to just call somebody even though there was resistance. Or at the end, if that buddy hadn’t called me in three weeks, to actually say how . . . that person didn’t serve me. It was asked of us to be really honest, or how that relationship may not have served or how it did serve. We were encouraged to be really honest, to be in a safe space, be really honest. . . . It’s something we don’t do very much in our society is confrontation and really dealing with the truth about how relationships are going or not going. So it was great for me to be with a buddy and confront things that were hard for me and learn from them.

When conflicts arise, participants are encouraged to use their EOL tools to engage in a conscious process with their buddy. They can also ask for support from the facilitation team or from the village as a whole to help mediate and resolve the conflict.
Carol spoke about how the buddy system gave her insight into how she functions in relationships, depending on the natural quality of resonance she feels with someone:

The quality of that relationship very much depended on the person that I was with. . . . the first buddy that I had was fantastic, she and I are still in touch. We had a really strong connection, like right away. . . . I guess we had three others altogether. And I had a pretty strong connection with one, one basically disappeared on me, and one I basically disappeared on. And so it was a really interesting kind of progression between that. It’s like, I get to see how I respond when people don’t show up for me, in the way that I expect, and then I get to see how I feel when I don’t show up for people the way that I expect… working through the annoyance and the guilt. . . . I think that the one who disappeared on me was first, so I kind of had that feeling, “Well, that was a bummer.” . . . And then I went in and did the exact same thing.

My first buddy was one of those people I might not have naturally chosen. He felt the same—he later told me he thought to himself, “Oh no” when he was assigned to me. But from the start we approached our relationship in an intentional way, engaging some of the EOL tools such as the creative scene process to envision how we wanted our relationship with one another to be, and it ended up being an unexpectedly positive connection and source of support for both of us.

For many participants, their buddy relationships continue long after the EOL five-month process is over. Carl said,

The buddy system for me was invaluable and continues to be. I still have buddies—we don’t meet as often, but there’s people I can go to, we have a process and it’s wonderful. It’s cheaper than a therapist and more valuable 95% of the time.

I have also experienced the lasting connection that becomes possible through buddy relationship—two of my four buddies are now very close friends of mine, and we have continued to be in regular contact and support one another over the past two years since our EOL-8 circle formally ended.
A Web of Mutual Support

Amongst and across these various circles or tiers of support, there are threads of connection that link all of the various individuals in unique and multi-layered ways. For example, a group of young parents who are in the program may get together with their children on a regular basis outside of the program, or coordinate to bring their children out to the RDI site for a weekend of the course. A member of the leadership team may be learning to play the ukulele, and find support in a participant who is a musician and plays music with them on the Saturday evenings of the program around the fire. The lines of connection that form within the group are as varied and diverse as in any village. This interweaving helps to bind the rings together, and bring us back to the concept of the basket that is the whole of the EOL circle.

Taproots of Trust and Connection

Forming a foundation for relationships of trust and connection is a critical component of the first weekend. The seeding of these connections begins before the program starts, as many individuals attend an introductory session, either in person or on the phone, and therefore have often met at least a few of the participants in addition to the core leadership team. Some have had a personal phone call with an alumni or an instructor. Others have carpooled to RDI with individuals they have linked up with through a participant list. Thus by the time that the participants step into the fire circle on the first weekend, the web has already begun to form. Beginning with gratitude and intentions creates the opportunity for participants to arrive with their full authenticity and vulnerability, and to get to know one another more quickly than they might in a more
typical introductions process. Often deep connections are formed right within that opening circle, as participants resonate with what others share and together build the collective field for the weekend. Jeff Z. talked about how his first gratitude circle helped him to feel at home:

When we sat down for our first circle, I remember, we were doing gratitudes, which is a practice that I’m familiar with, but don’t have a lot of in my life outside of nature connection. . . . So there are loads of coyotes along the coast down where I was living. And every night for a week, the coyotes had been sitting up on the bluff howling, and then a couple of nights right before EOL, they had been literally in our yard…

So we were doing gratitudes and I was one of the second or third people to go just by virtue of where I was sitting, and I remember I was saying I was really grateful for the opportunity to sit in circle and take this work on, and also I was feeling really grateful for the coyotes showing up for me lately. I think they were getting me prepped for this. I was looking around the circle, wondering how are they going to take this? And everybody was like oh yea, coyotes wow. That’s beautiful. And I thought, okay, that’ll do. I’m in.

In addition to the non-formal means of bonding that occur in those first hours, a few intentional activities are built in to help generate trust and connection, which include presencing and creating the group agreements.

**Presencing**

After returning from their first sit spot, the participants are introduced to one another again, through an activity called “Becoming Present with One Another,” or simply, “presencing.” This exercise was adapted for EOL from the Interchange Counseling program that Christopher Kuntzsch participated in, but also has roots in other transformative programs such as Joanna Macy’s Work that Reconnects. Participants are invited to “mill about” the room, at first just walking around, observing who is in the space, how it feels to be there, and what they notice about one another. Throughout this
time, they are prompted to consider that they get to decide how they want to be with one
another during the five month journey, and beyond. They are invited to then find
themselves in front of one other person, and making eye contact or not, to connect
silently with that person, while one of the instructors leads them in the activity through a
narrative such as the following (excerpted from the EOL facilitation guide, drafted by
Lauren Van Ham):

Imagine that you might actually be able to LIKE this person across from you . . .
that they may have qualities and ways of being that you really appreciate. And
then, allow yourself to consider that the person across from you is thinking of you
in the same way. Taking that in, find a way to thank that person and return to
mingling . . . moving around the room, noticing all these faces . . . and then find
yourself stopping in front of another new being.

IMAGINE that you might actually come to TRUST this person, that no matter
how remote or palpable, that this space between you could become patience,
kindness . . . and even love. Breathe into this possibility . . . thank this person
across from you. And begin to mingle again . . . until you find yourself across
from another person, a new sacred energy. A reflection of yourself. Consider that
this person might be a Teacher in some way, a person who might help you
cultivate compassion, gratitude, forgiveness. Perhaps they will help you step more
clearly into your VISION. How cool is that?

And KNOW that the person across from you is thinking of you in the same way.
As you sink into the possibility of this, thank them. And mingle once more . . .

And again you find yourself across from another human; another expression of
the Divine Universe. Someone who brings a very specific set of unique skills,
another language, siblings, wisdom, and a lineage they’re carrying. All that
they’re carrying. Consider that they have tremendous capacity for deep listening,
and empathy, and that they see things in you, as well. Feel the sweetness of that.
What if you were to lean into that capacity for yourself? And with this other
being? Take another moment and thank them. Begin mingling again . . . and find
another being across from you. Another reflection of yourself . . .

Touch into that energy. Allow your heart and senses to open. Tap into your
curiosity: “Wow, what is this person about?” A treasure chest of gifts and
capacity. This person may help you define or redefine what integrity, forgiveness
or generosity means. Know that they’re seeing this in you. This person plays a
unique role in the ecology . . . as do you in this ecology we’re creating and
discovering. Consider you might bring just the right nutrients for this person to
grow their service path, in their family or elsewhere. Consider you might come to
care for this person; to celebrate with them, to hold them when they’re really sad.
And they might do this for you, too. Thank them... and find a spot in the circle.

The presencing activity creates a basis for connection that pushes people to go
beyond their comfort zones and to see and feel one another intimately within their first
few hours of spending time together. It is not always comfortable, but often has profound
effects. It asks individuals to go beyond the stereotypes and judgments they might have
walking into the circle, based on how people appear, and to really see one another as
fellow humans on the path. When asked what was memorable about that first weekend,
Jeff M. said, “In particular the circling around and just being with each other. It was a
great place to start.” Regina also shared that this was a transformative activity for her:

An a-ha moment for me was in a simple eye gazing meditation that we did in the
beginning of each circle. Really connecting with people’s eyes. Feeling their spirit
and trusting and really imagining trusting someone fully, someone that you don’t
know that well and just sinking into the possibility that it’s safe out there and in
each of us is just heart and love and... a capacity for unconditionally loving.
That was very made visceral in those moments of building intimacy in the circle.
I’m really grateful for that.

While the first pairs are often tentative, reluctant to make eye contact, and somewhat
distant, by the end of the exercise the energy in the room has shifted considerably— many
people are holding hands, gazing freely into one another’s eyes, laughing, crying, or
hugging. The effect of experiencing multiple intimate contacts in quick succession, with
depthening layers of meaning suggested by the narrative prompts, creates a field of love
and effervescence in the room. In addition, one aspect that many people comment on is
how without words they are able to feel the unique quality of connection that they have
with each of the five people they were partnered with. For me, I still feel viscerally the
experience of connection I had with several distinct individuals in that short activity.
**Group Agreements**

On the afternoon of the first day of the program, the group is held in a process of creating the agreements that will help guide them throughout the course of the program. They are asked to consider what would help them to feel safe, held, and able to be fully actualized during their time in EOL, as well as how they would like to hold and show up for others. This is an extended version of what other groups sometimes call setting ground rules or confidentiality agreements. Together, the group has the opportunity to hash out what their respective needs are, set intentions for how they want their overall experience to be, and to commit to a set of agreements.

Donna shared how this activity played a part in what helped to create a safe space for intimacy and trust to develop during her first weekend of EOL:

I remember that weekend how surprising it was to get into a space of intimacy so quickly. . . how were those conditions created to feel so safe, so fast and be so intimate so quickly? It happened within that first weekend. Obviously part of that has to do with agreements around confidentiality, but that’s just one element to it. I think so much of that was the facilitation of you and James. It was beautifully done…to feel safe and comfortable and willing to express myself in a group of 20 people, 19 of whom I’ve never met before. So, that’s how I remember that first weekend.

For the facilitation of the activity, the circle is invited to share what they would like to be included in the agreements. If there are questions or disagreement about the suggestions, a discussion ensues. At the end of the process, individuals are asked if they can each commit to upholding these agreements, and to show their affirmation in some way. An example of the end result of a group’s agreement process can be seen in Figure 5.8. This particular group envisioned themselves to be on a ship that was about to sail, and framed their conversation in the context of what they needed to have on board with them as they left the harbor together. As you can see in Figure 5.7, the group agreements in EOL are
about much more than just confidentiality—it includes such aspects as honoring one another, asking for support, making I statements, having fun, generosity, courage, and testing our assumptions. Essentially, the group is asked to envision what it would take for them to have the most powerful experience possible—to imagine being in a community of “radical support and trust” in which they can be fully supported in their transformative process.

The design of the group agreements is the first collaborative process the group is asked to engage in. As such, it not only helps to build trust through the setting of and commitment to the agreements themselves; it also is a means for the group to begin to get to know one another and to deepen their connections through a co-creative activity. These agreements are also revisited throughout the program, and can be renegotiated or changed if needed. There is also a deepening of the meaning of the agreements as trust and cohesion builds in the village.
Other Aspects of Group Bonding

There are many other aspects of the group bonding and trust building process that begin on the first weekend. One important component of this is the group debriefs in the yurt. Frequently throughout the weekend, space is opened up to the circle for people to share their reflections on the process and the content, as well as what is moving for them emotionally through their experience. This can also include making interpersonal dynamics within the village transparent in the circle and using the circle to air conflicts and seek resolution in a healthy, village-supported way. Some examples of the topics that I have witnessed come forward and be named in the circle that are outside of the official “curriculum” but which are all welcomed include dynamics between the masculine and feminine, issues of race, sexuality and gender identity, interpersonal conflicts within the circle, questions of power and voice, issues around physical ability/disability and health, questions regarding parenthood, family, and relationships, and questions around rites of passage, age, and intergenerational cooperation—be it the concerns of being a young person regarding inheriting a world in trouble or seniors’ concerns around stepping into their last phase of life without proper training or support for Elderhood. Often it is during the collective sharing that much of the magic, healing and learning happens, as will be discussed in coming chapters. Other important aspects of the village building include sharing meals, camping on the land, spending time around the fire, movement, dancing, singing, playing music, and making art together. All of these components are introduced throughout the first weekend, and build throughout the program as participants each add their own individual interests and contributions.
Cultivating Fertile Soil for Healing and Action

This chapter has described some of the core building blocks for cultivating fertile soil for a transformative process. Key elements include consciously welcoming participants with an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance; the introduction of the core routines of gratitude, intentions, journaling, and sit spot; and the building of the village both through the establishment of formal structures of support and through group bonding and trust building activities. Together, these aspects help to create a safe container and environment for the healing process to being. In the next chapter, we will dive into the “roots and soil,” to explore the elements that help participants in EOL to engage in a process of inner healing and transformation.
PART THREE: INTO THE ROOTS AND SOIL
CHAPTER SEVEN: ENTERING A HEALING JOURNEY

In Part Three, we travel deep into the “roots and soil” to examine the inner healing process at the heart of the Ecology of Leadership. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the core elements of entering a healing journey. I return to the tree model, to look more closely at what is happening under the surface. I then discuss the principles of natural healing and bioremediation. We revisit Rumi’s Field, and consider what it would be like for a healing process to be sourced in non-judgment, curiosity and acceptance. I then reveal what my research indicates about the core components of a healing process, including common obstacles and essential nutrients.

A Deeper Look at the Tree Model

As presented in Chapter Three, the tree model explains that what is visible in the canopy of our lives and leadership is a direct reflection of the composition and health of our inner soil and root systems. The roots and other underground elements represent everything that is unseen but which influences our outer lives, including our past experiences, our ancestral histories, and our beliefs and thought patterns. There is a

Figure 7.1 The Tree Model (drawn by Katia Sol)
direct relationship between the roots and soil and the canopy, represented by the arrows in Figure 7.1.

EOL suggests that for the most part we are each born with healthy, vibrant soil and root systems, with which we naturally experience joy, love and freedom as children. This is expressed as uninhibited, “childlike” emotions such as happiness, playfulness, curiosity, and wonder. As the individual moves through life, incidents begin to occur that impact the soil. These are described in EOL as nuggets, or rocks that become embedded in our inner world and block our full growth, expression and freedom. For example, a teacher scolding a child for reading aloud a certain way might result in an adult who feels shame about presenting or reading aloud in public. More serious events include experiences such as the loss of a parent, a divorce, alcoholism in the family, abuse, and so on. These incidents manifest as nuggets that get lodged in the roots and soil, as depicted in Figure 7.2. The nuggets can also be sourced in ancestral wounds (e.g. the impact of colonialism) or to traumatic experiences in the womb or at birth—thus compromising the root system from the start.
Participants’ Experiences with the Tree Model

The tree model is introduced in EOL as a framework for participants to understand that if they want to achieve certain goals in their lives and leadership, or understand why they feel stuck or challenged, they need to first examine their own inner landscapes. For Kyle, the concept of the tree gave him a sense of power, as he realized that within him lay the potential for his full growth and actualization:

I think the most powerful experience I had was really feeling the analogy that within an acorn seed it holds all the intelligence and potential of the tree…that within me that I have everything right now to fully grow into a powerful, healthy being. And that I don’t need to go outside of myself for that energy and inspiration and integrity.

For participants who enter EOL with a strong outward or goal-oriented focus, the tree model can be surprising and confrontational. Carl discussed how it gave him insight into inner struggles that were impacting his outer life:

EOL was and continues to be a wonderful way to start healing those childhood wounds. And the first step in that is realizing we all have childhood wounds. And I’m sure there’s people that walk into EOL and have no idea that they’re wounded—I was one of them. So just being introduced to the concept and understanding that part of the reason you’re suffering and going through all this pain is because you are carrying around these childhood wounds and here’s why. And walking through that process deliberately to come out the other side and say, “Oh by the way here are some tools to use to start healing.”

Lauren also talked about how the tree model gave her a way to look for inner nuggets, framing them as “geothermal pockets” in her soil:

The tree, as a metaphor in EOL, also gave me the tool for retracing steps and actually finding the source and the origin of where some of the hotter temperatures maybe exist, little geothermal pockets. And to be in a spiritual, loving, emotionally rich relationship with them without it running my life.

The identification of these nuggets is the first step in the process of entering a healing journey. It is supported in EOL by exercises such as the life story and inner
tracking, which will be described in a later section. First I will discuss how the ecological healing metaphor is extended conceptually to work with some of those nuggets through the principles of natural healing and bioremediation.

**Natural Healing and Bioremediation**

A second core principle in the Ecology of Leadership is that healing is a natural process, which can be supported through collaboration with the natural world and with our own selves. The concept of core “wounds” that happen in one’s childhood and impact one’s adult life is not novel to EOL—it is in fact the central foundation within most strands of modern psychology. However, what is unique to EOL is the framing of this within an ecological metaphor, and the application of natural principles such as bioremediation for working with the wounds or nuggets.

The EOL framework proposes that we are all natural beings, and as with all life, there is a natural process at work that is moving us toward regeneration and wholeness. Accordingly, if we cooperate with ourselves and with nature then healing will organically occur. Biologist Jane Benyus describes this principle, proclaiming, “Life creates the conditions that are conducive to life” (Hawken, 2006, p. 8). Thus, according to EOL, part of entering the healing journey is merely setting the intention for healing, and creating supportive conditions for that to occur.

As applied to the “nuggets,” EOL relates this process to the concept of bioremediation, or the use of “biological organisms to solve an environmental problem such as contaminated soil or groundwater” (Environmental Inquiry, n.d.). In the case of the individual, the contamination is of the inner landscape by the nuggets or source
events. With each of these incidents, the soil becomes less healthy—infiltimated with toxic qualities such as shame, fear, judgment, and mistrust, and the roots become less able to thrive, which in turn impacts the growth and potential of the canopy. As stated by Ingerman (2013),

Right now many of us walk around with unexamined thoughts, attitudes and emotions. We live a life filled with fear and this generates states of hate and war. . . This is a reflection of how we live from a place of separation. (p. 208)

Ingerman’s quote demonstrates how fear in the root systems of individuals leads to outer violence. She also speaks directly to the concept of blockages that are impeding the flow of life, extending this concept to the current context in the West:

In the modern Western world our tendency is to try to cure symptoms. We often overlook the core energetic system and how that needs to be restored to a state of balance so that the entire life force of a person and the planet can flow again toward a state of well-being.

To truly create positive healing for the planet, as well as for ourselves and others, we must stop focusing on symptoms. We must look through the eyes of spirit to see the movement of energy and any blocks that might be discovered in the energetic web of life. (p. 205)

As indicated here, the metaphor of the tree is easily applied to the wider situation of humanity, and the collective wounds and nuggets that are in our system as a whole. Although the primary focus in EOL is on the individual, one of the natural principles is that as one component of the system begins to heal, it is also tied to the healing of the whole system. The individual’s process is supported by the collective, and vice versa. In addition, the setting of the village becomes an experimental ground for changing the collective system—the group becomes like the ecosystem in which the individual grows and changes. As the circle shifts its culture and takes on new aspects, the individual is
further supported to transform, and in reverse as the individuals change the circle and system also transforms.

The question is therefore, what supports the bioremediation process to occur, and the nuggets to be removed or released? Or as framed often within EOL, how can the nuggets be “composted”—an organic process in which waste is recycled into nutrients and fertilizer for more growth. With the composting of the nuggets, those aspects of our lives that have been challenging are framed as opportunities for healing and renewal, particularly through their transformation.

**Participants’ Experiences with Natural Healing**

Tim gave an example of this in a statement about changing his relationship to his wounds to see them as “allies” for growth:

For those of us, which is a lot of us, that have wounds, reframing our relationship with those wounds and finding a way to nurture them and hold them in a good way as opposed to judge and hate and have aversion to (them) . . . it’s kind of a core first step, because as long as they’re your nemesis, you can’t really get close to them. You’re constantly fighting. So it’s like, how do I move from trying to beat and conquer and overcome or hide, how can this actually be an ally? . . . moving through this is going to allow you to do so many things in the world in a powerful way. So awesome. You’ve got really powerful opportunities just waiting for you to do a little work around it.

As Tim indicates, the transformation and composting process doesn’t just happen—it begins with a decision to find a way to hold the wounds “in a good way,” as opposed to fighting them with judgment, hate, and aversion. This is an important realization, which brings us directly to the topic of “Rumi’s Field.”
Rumi’s Field

In order to begin the bioremediation and composting process of the nuggets, EOL proposes that the first step is to enter into “Rumi’s Field.” As described in the introduction, Rumi’s Field is a reference to a quote from the 13th century Persian poet Jalal’u’din Rumi, who said, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field—I’ll meet you there.” The introduction of Rumi’s Field invites participants to consider what it would be like to imagine living in a state of curiosity and without judgment, and to meet oneself and one another with a “beginner’s mind.”

The role of curiosity in the transformative process emerged as an important finding in the IONS research on transformation, which states, “…one of the most important ingredients that you can bring to your transformative path is a strong sense of curiosity and inquisitiveness.” (Schlitz et al., 2007, p. 71). Schlitz et al. go on to say that many teachers pointed to beginner’s mind as one of the fundamental attitudes needed for mindful living. . . . An old Zen saying goes, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s there are few.” (p. 72)

They cite psychologist and author Charles Tart, as saying, “One of the most essential aspects of this path…is curiosity, just wondering what things are really like” (p. 72). The EOL curriculum emphasizes this aspect in the framing of Rumi’s Field—if we come into our process and healing with a fixed set of assumptions, expectations, and judgments about what we will find and what is needed to accomplish change, then there is very little room for growth and learning to occur. Whereas, if we can meet ourselves with curiosity, we are open to discover what is really our true path. Young et al. (2010) call curiosity “our greatest resource for learning” (p. 42), and structure most of their “coyote”
educational style around strategic questioning that prompts the learner to cultivate even deeper questions and discovery.

The concept of Rumi’s Field is related to the Tree Model in the question of where the individual’s actions are rooted or “sourced.” As indicated by Ingerman (2013), when we are sourcing from a place of fear or judgment, the result will likely be actions infused with the spirit of violence. So even if the action itself is theoretically “good” in nature—e.g. an activist attempt to save an old growth forest—if it is sourced from negativity and judgment, it will have a particular flavor that may color the outcome. For example, even if the tree is saved, the result may be more anger and hatred either within the activist herself, or between the activist and logging communities, or both.

Another concept that is introduced is the idea that “maybe everything is perfect, just as it is.” Rumi’s concept of meeting beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing can be very challenging for participants, many of whom come into the program wanting to change themselves and the world, and with a clear idea of right and wrong, and good and bad. However, just entertaining the possibility of releasing those judgments to meet themselves and the world in Rumi’s Field is a gateway into acceptance and healing.

*Participants’ Experiences with Rumi’s Field*

According to the research, once participants release their attachments to a particular outcome for themselves or the world, they then have more freedom to allow for the natural process of healing to occur and can be more attuned to how they are evolving as individuals. Donna said,
It’s a voice I hear a lot. I hear James sitting on my shoulder saying, “Consider the possibility that everything’s perfect just the way it is.” In a trying time, that’s really helpful to hear, to help me look for the gifts in the moment.

As Donna indicates, Rumi’s Field helps participants to reframe challenging situations, and rather than immediately classifying them as “bad” to be able to look instead with curiosity and wonder. Kyle gave a profound description of how this concept influenced his view of the world:

I have changed how I see the world in that respect. James would do something really awesome and be like, let’s talk about Sarah Palin. Something that’s obviously controversial and obviously triggering a lot of people. . . . James would be like, did the universe really screw up or is this consciousness evolving? Is this just the innocence of life doing its best? It’s everything from my mom telling me to put on my sweater to when Japan had that huge earthquake, and looking at that as nature’s way of saying, look at this, this is what’s important. Clean water, clean air, clean food, clean environment.

For Kyle, the idea of being able to hold whatever happens in a state of curiosity allowed him to then cultivate compassion and understanding—ranging from his mom to Hitler:

Seeing that possibility . . . just rippled into my life. Everything I thought was bad, I saw in a new light. All the genocides, all the deep dark things that happened on this planet, I looked within me and was like okay, this is just about learning about ourselves. This is just about learning who we are as human beings. We did a lot of unconscious things, but we did them, because at the moment for some reason that was just what was the easiest thing . . . that’s how nature works. And it created a precedent. It’s still happening in some ways, but I just see it as consciousness becoming conscious of itself. And it just gives me a huge relief. I can see . . . my mom trying to get me to put on my sweater . . . its love. When people are doing things like Hitler did, it’s the lack of love. It’s the suffering in their own heart. If he felt immense love, he would be Mother Teresa. What happened to him? What happened to his ancestors? His collective consciousness?

This does not mean that EOL endorses violent or harmful behavior—or systemic problems such as fascism, genocide, cruelty or abuse of the land or people. It means, as Kyle infers, that when we can view these events from Rumi’s field we can understand the root cause of these issues as a “lack of love”—as the “suffering in their own heart.” With
this lens of compassion and understanding, the possibility for transformation of unjust systems and situations actually becomes more possible than when one is sourcing from anger.

Jeff M. spoke about how Rumi’s Field enabled him to have a new perspective by getting curious about his own personal triggers when they would arise:

I could see how it could allow (me) to see whatever it was coming up in a different light, because there’s a lot of flexibility. There’s not a right or wrong about it. Play with that. . . . You can see how it could be a completely positive thing, even though it might not feel like that to you right then. It was a cool moment.

Carl described it as extremely healing to be in a village in which he could be met with full acceptance just as he was, saying, “It’s a gift to be given space where you can be fully vulnerable and not judged and shown how to go about starting to heal.”

Rumi’s Field is a precondition for healing because it helps create a field in which individuals can feel completely safe to be themselves and be met without judgment. I imagine it as similar to what must be required for truth and reconciliation work in places like Rwanda and South Africa. I am reminded of Peter and Linda Biehl, whom I met in South Africa in 2000. In 1990, their daughter, Amy Biehl, a white Stanford student who was working as a Fulbright scholar in the anti-apartheid efforts in South Africa, was dragged out of her car and brutally murdered by four men in the township of Guguletu. Rather than becoming blinded by anger or grief, her parents looked with curiosity at what had happened and how this could be best resolved. They determined that the murder happened because of the root cause of oppression and racism in South Africa, and that Amy would want them to continue her work. They forgave the four men who had killed her, supported their amnesty, and moved to South Africa, where they became directly
involved in the peace and reconciliation efforts. They set up a foundation to help fund schools and businesses in the Guguletu Township, employing two of the killers. Linda Biehl said of Peter, “He was a mentor to these two young men. And they loved him” (Anton, 2002). When I visited with my Stanford group Talisman A Cappella in 2000, we sang at the site of her death, and visited the foundation’s projects. Everywhere we went, the Biehls were greeted by the community with great love, warmth and friendship. This to me is a supreme example of Rumi’s Field– that no matter how much damage has been done, we have the possibility to meet in a place beyond judgment, and find our common humanity. To bring this much love, forgiveness, curiosity, understanding and acceptance is powerful medicine for composting nuggets such as shame and fear that block our individual and collective root systems.

**Other Core Principles of the EOL Healing Journey**

**Healing is The Application of Loving to the Places within us that Hurt**

With Rumi’s Field as the foundation, the next step in the bioremediation process is for individuals to begin to move into greater self-loving and acceptance of themselves. Without having to label one’s wounds or nuggets “wrong” or “bad,” one can learn to just observe them and bring loving attention to them. Kyle spoke about how this idea supported him in his healing:

It’s just this invitation to be present with yourself. And then James would always say, “Healing is the application of loving in the place that it hurts. . . . That makes it so innocent to me. That I can just be still and whatever comes up, just give it love. Forgive it. Give it whatever feels like is good for it. Send positive energy towards it. It feels like I’m going in. . . it’s sort of like cleaning spots on cars or something. Or if it’s soil, putting some mushrooms in there that heal the bad guys.
As a principle for healing, the idea of applying love to the places within us that are hurt is an approach that is based on a gentle transformation of our wounds through intentionally bringing love and compassion to ourselves.

**Learning to Love What Is**

Implicit in Kyle’s statement is another core idea in the EOL framework, which is looking at our own “inner gardens” without judgment, learning to love and welcome what we find. Tim spoke about how this freed him to look at and release some of his shame:

I think hidden in the way that inner gardening is introduced and the example of the tree and thinking about the nurturing of the soil…what is implicit in that model is it’s a very shameless way of talking about healing, which for me ends up being really important because… core to my healing process is healing through some of that shame. . . . It creates a space of, well it’s okay to be imperfect; it’s okay to have grief. And really recognizing that not only is it okay, those things actually can nourish you… you realize that maybe instead of causing pain or anxiety, moving through those can allow you to be more powerful and happier and more joyful.

This principle is a direct application of Rumi’s Field to one’s own personal process and the various emotions that might show up. Tim’s statement about learning to see pain and grief as nourishing contributors to his healing reflects an idea presented in another Rumi poem that is often referenced in EOL, called The Guest House (Figure 5.4). Carle references this poem when talking about her own process of cultivating self-loving:
I do love myself. And self-judgment comes up … I think one big realization in that department was around … this pull to self-improve. I just want to be a more accomplished human being. I want to love deeper and love myself deeper and love the earth and just be a good person and really self-explore. Balancing that with self-acceptance, with wanting to really love who I am in the moment and all of the shadowy parts of myself… there’s this poem by Rumi, The Guest House, and that’s really been an important poem throughout my journey for me of just really loving all of the guests, even the unsavory emotions. To just welcome them all in for tea, because they’re all part of me… Just knowing that that’s perfect and that everything has a place, that’s just been such a comforting concept for me. Because I think this being human, it’s hardly ever just rosy and flowers. There’s always the other side.

As Carle states, by coming into a place of acceptance of where one is as “perfect,” one can move toward greater self-acceptance and loving of all of one’s self, including the shadow parts. Adam Kahane speaks about how the wound becomes the gift in his book *Power and Love* (2010), saying,

In healing ourselves (and others), our wound becomes our gift. It points us to the part of ourselves that is sensitive and vulnerable and so requires our compassionate attention. Our willingness to recognize and admit our woundedness enables us to take the risk of stepping forward and stumbling or falling, and so to learn and grow. (p. 130)
As Kahane indicates, by turning our compassion inward, and learning to love what is, we create more ability to move forward and “learn and grow.”

**Creating Safety for Moving Stuck Emotions**

For each of the nuggets that are embedded in the soil and roots, there are often strong emotions attached, such as shame, fear, anger, and grief. Being able to let the deep emotions that are tied to these nuggets be expressed and move in a healthy way is another key aspect of the healing and bioremediation process. For Nalini, this was a revolutionary concept, having grown up in a household where expressing one’s emotions was not acceptable:

Before EOL, I knew I had a lot of stuff inside of me brewing from angst of various years of craziness—I mean we all do right? And I guess in my mind I just didn’t know that there was a way you could deal with it. I thought you just got over it and moved on.

Macy and Johnstone (2012) validate the cultural roots of Nalini’s experience, writing, “Admitting the depths of our anguish, even to ourselves, takes us into culturally forbidden territory. From an early age we’ve been told to pull ourselves together, to cheer up or shut up.” (p. 38). They go on to say, “What makes many of us nervous about looking at our grief or despair is the fear that we will become stuck in those emotions.” (p. 69). However, it is creating space for the movement of those emotions that makes the shift possible. As Macy and Johnstone have learned through her work,

It is our consistent experience that as people open to the flow of their emotional experience, including despair, sadness, guilt, fury, or fear, they feel a weight being lifted from them. In the journey into the pain, something foundational shifts; a turning occurs. (pp. 69–70)

This is true also in the experience of the Ecology of Leadership, as Nalini went on to say,
And when I came to EOL and I sat in community and I realized...there’s a much better way...which was amazing for me, because I had never known there was another way. So it was like the sun came out on a cloudy day...that was huge for me and really has been super transformative.

**Running to the Roar**

Another important premise for healing that emerged from the data is the concept of “running to the roar.” As presented by Michael Meade, the principle is based on an Indigenous teaching story from Africa about how lion hunting packs would trap their prey by sending a set of older, weaker lions to one side of a grazing herd, while they lay in wait on the other side. The older lions would roar loudly, causing the panicked herd to run straight into the mouths of the awaiting pride. Meade (2011) says, “‘Run towards the roar,’ the old people used to tell the young ones. When faced with great danger in this world, run towards the roaring, go where you fear to go, for only there will you find some safety and a way through danger.”

James pointed out seeing this quality in Tim’s EOL process during our interview with him: He said,

I just want to acknowledge you, because leaning into what we resist and what we fear is the secret to the doorway heading to the way home. And I think you did that. Because our tendency is to try to find some other way, short cut, and it just follows you.

To which Tim replied:

As it turns out, that is the short cut. The short cut is actually to head right towards it. That’s the short cut. But to do that, you’re going to shake the foundation of a lot of your patterns. If you really take the shortcut, more things are going to fall, so just be ready. Which is good. Life is short. Take the short cut.
In many ways, EOL invites individuals to run to the roar—as James says, to “lean into what we resist and what we fear.” This principle is supported by Margaret Wheatley (2009), author of the classic text *Leadership and the New Science*, who writes,

> Fear is fundamental to being human, and so we can expect that we’ll feel afraid at times, perhaps even frequently. What’s important is to notice what we do with our fear. We can withdraw or distract or numb ourselves. Or we can recognize the fear, and then step forward anyway. Fearlessness simply means that we do not give fear the power to silence or stop us. (p. 152)

Kahane (2010) also speaks to this:

> What holds us back from exercising all of our power and all of our love? Fear. Because we are afraid of offending or hurting others, we hold back our purposefulness and our power. Because we are afraid of being embarrassed or hurt, we hold back our openness and our love. We dysfunctionally allow our fears to prevent us from becoming whole. . . . Although we may believe that fear helps us avoid getting hurt, often the opposite is true: we suffer more from trying to avoid pain than from pain itself. (p. 132)

As Kahane and Wheatley both indicate, only by looking directly at our fear, and bringing our curiosity and love to our nuggets, can the healing and bioremediation process begin. Just like mycelium which enter the earth to transform toxins as part of nature’s natural tendency toward healing itself, love and the intention are the nutrients which create the conditions for our own inner natural healing process to take place.

*A Foundation for Healing*

In summary, the healing and transformation process in EOL is framed from the perspective that like a tree, our outer reality and well-being reflects our inner landscape and health. Entering into a healing journey includes setting the intention to cooperate with our natural process of healing or bioremediation, cultivating a state of curiosity and non-judgment, applying love to the places within us that hurt, learning to love what is,
moving our stuck emotions, and directly facing our deepest fears and resistance. Throughout, some of the core blocks or nuggets that tend to prevent individuals’ full expression and healing include shame, fear, judgment, and grief, and the nutrients which promote healing include curiosity, acceptance, forgiveness, and love.

These core principles for healing are the basis for specific practices and pathways for healing that are introduced in EOL. In the following chapters, I will discuss how EOL participants engaged the healing and transformation of their roots and soil through the specific pathways of healing with the self, healing with the natural world, and healing with the village.
CHAPTER EIGHT: HEALING WITH THE SELF

This chapter focuses on the personal practices and tools introduced in EOL to support the individual in a process of “inner gardening,” or as is sometimes coined in EOL, “inner permaculture.” The core routines of gratitude, intentions, journaling and the sit spot, described in Part Two, prepare the soil and anchor the individual for the next stage of the inner gardening process, which is cultivating self-awareness. Participants are encouraged to engage a conscious process of “inner tracking” and to map out their own roots and soil systems by conducting a comprehensive interior landscape assessment. This is supported through the introduction of three practices: the life story exercise, patterns journaling, and the ownership process. In this chapter, I introduce each of these practices, and using the participants’ stories and my own, describe how engaging in inner gardening leads to greater self-awareness and healing.

Cultivating Inner Awareness

In permaculture design, the first step when approaching a new project or area to be cultivated is to do a site assessment. The same is true in a process of “inner gardening” or “inner permaculture.” By bringing the Rumi’s Field spirit of curiosity and observation to one’s own interior landscape, one can begin to develop a sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge about what is present, and also what the opportunities may be for growth and healing. Schlitz et al. (2007) discuss the importance of cultivating this kind of insight, saying that “the ability to discern or grasp the true nature of a situation” (p. 117) is the first step when cultivating a transformative practice. They write,
Transformative insights can help you to identify the roots of problems within yourself, whether these are faulty assumptions, dysfunctional behaviors, or beliefs that no longer serve you. Seeing a situation clearly is the first step toward determining what changes need to be made; sometimes insights even reveal what steps are required to make those changes. (p. 117)

Laura talked about how EOL helped her to identify internal aspects that were uncomfortable and therefore ready for further development and cultivation:

All of it brought me into awareness of the topography of my inner landscape. Maybe it started because it was uncomfortable. It was like oh wow, I’m uncomfortable, which means there’s something there. And now I’m aware of this whole other landscape or aspect of my landscape that is . . . wow I want to plant a garden there. . . . So it brought me into a much bigger awareness of what was here to be worked with or played with.

Just as Schlitz et al. indicate, the first step for Laura was to look honestly within her own landscape; with this knowledge, she could then determine the next steps for her healing.

There are a variety of tools that are introduced in EOL to support this process of cultivating self-awareness, including the life story exercise, patterns journaling, and the ownership process. In the next sections I will discuss each of these tools and what emerges for participants through their application and practice.

**Life Story Exercise**

The first inner gardening tool that is introduced is called the life story exercise. On the first evening of the program, participants are instructed to take a few hours to journal or draw a map of the major milestones and “source events” in their lives to date. These milestones are described as the major formative events or factors that inform how the participants see themselves at that point in time. This exercise creates a foundational map of the participant’s roots and soil system that one can then work with for the rest of the program. Some people write these events out in a list or a story; I chose to draw mine
in a spiral, moving out chronologically from my ancestors’ experiences in the center. In Figure 5.5, you can view my own life story map. Note that I colored certain events red to indicate negative impacts or “nuggets,” and yellow to indicate positive “nutrients.”

Figure 8.1—Katia’s Life Story Map (Katia Sol)
Delving into the life story exercise is the first experience in EOL in which participants have the opportunity to look at their own history and roots and soil, and it often presents challenges. Many people resist the exercise, saying that they enrolled in the program to move forward in their lives, and don’t want to waste time looking at the past. However, as we learned from James’ discussion of running to the roar, confronting that resistance and choosing to work through it often reveals treasures waiting to be discovered.

Carle’s experience with the exercise became a core aspect of her healing journey, as she uncovered a large nugget. When she was five, she said something at her preschool which led the school to believe she was being sexually abused by her father. This led to her being taken away from her parents and put in foster care for six months. Even though it was not true that she was being abused, and she in fact had a loving, healthy relationship with her parents, she was unable to convince anyone otherwise. She said,

So that was a huge nodule, and there’s a lot tied up in that in my self identity and my ability to self express fully and the emotions that come up when I do that around shame and grief and also a really deep belief about losing people that I love and that that’s going to be my fault… that was something that believe it or not, before that, I hadn’t acknowledged as something that had really deeply affected me and my beliefs. There was a moment when I was writing my story that (I realized)—wow, that’s kind of a big deal for a 5 year old to be taken away (from) their parents. And there wasn’t really any processing afterwards. I had a really great childhood afterwards. I was really resilient—children are really resilient, but . . . I learned some really core beliefs as a result of that.

Through that experience, Carle developed the belief that it was dangerous to speak out or express her feelings as doing so could cause her to lose the people that she loves most. Carle went on to work with this nugget throughout her EOL process, engaging her family
in therapy and ultimately making her final project’s focus about reclaiming her voice through song.

*Patterns Journaling*

The second tool for inner gardening is patterns journaling, which is an application of the journaling practice to a conscious process of inner tracking and discovery. The concept of tracking is borrowed here from the nature connection practice of literally tracking an animal through their trails and marks (be it their scat, their footprints, their mark on the land, etc.). As applied to the self, the objective is to observe and record one’s patterns, and to track or follow the trail to find out how these external patterns are connected to or sourced from one’s internal beliefs, judgments, assumptions, and original source events. This practice is engaged throughout the program at various points, with the introduction of content pieces. For example, when exploring Rumi’s Field and judgments, participants are invited to journal about their own self-judgments, their judgments of those close to them (family, close friends and partners), and their judgments of the world, and then they discuss those with a buddy and also in the group. As another example, after completing the life story exercise, participants are asked to journal about the patterns that they notice in their life and family history. Lauren discovered through the exercise that her patterns mirror those of her mother:

There was the chapter where I just couldn’t stand my mom and I was so just nauseated by the way she was reacting to such and such—and now when I think about how she was reacting, I think about how much I do the same thing, and (I realized) oh wow I’m my mom . . . it’s like, in capitals in my journal. I AM MY MOM. And seeing that, that’s fine. That that’s actually . . . that can be great. And I love my mom, so I can love that part of myself too.
Simply through engaging the exercise, Lauren was able to identify a nugget that was in her soil, and to transform it into viewing herself with greater compassion and love. This practice is also applied during the content sections on trigger tracking; commitment, integrity, and accountability; expectations, attachments, and assumptions; time management and energy allocation; and at other key points throughout the program. As each of these is introduced, participants are encouraged to take the material and relate it back to themselves, contemplating the external and internal impact on their lives.

**Ownership Process**

The third tool for inner gardening is called the ownership or “trigger tracking” process. This practice is introduced to help participants track what happens when they experience a “trigger.” The concept of a trigger is a common one in psychology—it is used to refer to an event that reactivates an emotional response connected to a prior traumatic experience. The trigger catapults the individual into a state of discomfort or reaction, such as anger, sadness, fear, frustration, or silence. In these experiences, the reptilian brain is activated, and it is common to react with a “fight or flight” response, or as Hedva (2008) categorizes them, “fight, flight, freeze, or faint.” (p. 1). Just like an animal under attack, we either fight back, flee, become paralyzed, or play dead. As put by Crowley and Lodge (2004),

> Reptiles run purely on negative reinforcement . . . the reptiles were doing pretty well with anger, fear and aggression. . . . Our primitive brain still runs our most basic functions, giving us a fierce, primal drive for our personal survival. (p. 247)
In the fear response, the other is seen as a threat; therefore the trigger is often accompanied by a strong blame impulse—to put at fault the person or external event that has triggered the reaction.

With the ownership process, the individual is invited to reverse one’s primal patterning of fighting against the other to consciously track and take ownership for one’s own part in the emotional response, and to find its root cause within. When introducing the ownership process, a volunteer is asked to work through a trigger publicly so that all can learn through the process. On my first weekend as a participant in EOL-8, Tim stepped forward, as he was in the middle of a break-up and had just been in a conflict with his girlfriend. I asked him to describe that incident again in our interview:

Tim’s reaction to his girlfriend is a clear trigger response. While his anger may seem justified, the ownership process teaches that an event can only trigger us if it is activating something within our own roots and soil system. For someone else, that incident might have had no charge associated with it. Therefore, the trigger provides the individual with a sign that there is something in the root system to be healed. The ownership process encourages the individual to engage the trigger as a “gift” and a healing opportunity. By delaying the normal reaction and instead calling upon curiosity, one has the possibility to
find out what’s really happening and where the reaction might be sourced in the roots and soil.

The steps of the ownership process as introduced in EOL are displayed in Figure 5.6. When the trigger event happens, the participant is encouraged to stop (delay reaction), pause, and notice what’s really happening. What is the data about the event, without the emotions or the associated stories? In Tim’s case, he was on his knees scrubbing the toilet, and his girlfriend came in and gave him some instructions about how to clean the rags when he was done. With a bit of perspective, he can then identify the emotions that surface, and the associated judgments, stories, and interpretations.

The next stage is to acknowledge the trigger as a teacher, a mirror, and a gateway into healing. With this perspective, one can view the person involved as a gift for their healing, and take the focus and blame away from them and the

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**Practice—Ownership Process**

1) Trigger event happens
2) Stop & notice!
3) What’s the data around the trigger?
4) What are the arising feelings?
5) What are the arising judgments, interpretations, & stories?
6) Acknowledge that the trigger is a teacher and mirror and provides a gateway for healing our soil and root system. See the person or people involved as a mirror and gift
7) Own the arising judgments. How is this a reflection of who you are?
8) What events or people are at the root of your judgments?
   a) Explore the who, what, when, where, and how of the original event
   b) Who stands behind your trigger mirror? Someone who influenced your root system may stand behind this mirror – who is that?
9) Unhook projections
10) Engage the source event
11) Get present to and work with the emotional content (embedded emotions) from the soil through:
   i) Journaling, counseling, music, sit spots, meditation, yoga, bike riding, running, climbing, group processes, art, etc.
12) Finding our way back home and into Rumi’s Field
   i) Release of embedded emotion
   ii) Release of embedded story

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*Figure 8.2 – Ownership Process (Christopher Kuntzsch and James Stark)*
external event. At this point the reaction becomes “unhooked” from the triggering person, and curiosity can be directed toward one’s own experiences and nuggets in the roots and soil. Tim described how he engaged this process:

I had the opportunity to . . . really sit with it and ask, what was really going on? It is really about the fact that she didn’t say hello. Yea, sure, maybe that would have been a nice thing to do. But does that warrant all the story that was coming up? And just going back and trying to get back to the source. . . . I was just feeling in shame...the story I was telling myself was I didn’t know how to do things right, I didn’t know how to make sure that things are clean the right way. . . . And that to me, what she said plucked me to that place of I’m not worthy... So, it was really just tracking back to the truth of that moment, which was I was just in shame and didn’t feel worthy of our relationship. And that just manifested in an explosion.

Once one has unhooked their projections, the search begins for the source event. What original experience(s) in the roots and soil is this feeling linked to? Who was involved, when did it occur, and what happened? In Tim’s case, he identified relatively quickly where this was sourced in his childhood:

(Lack of ) acceptance from my parents, especially my father. His way of being with us. He himself feeling threatened by his own children being in their creativity and their power. That sort of hiding and feeling like you’re not good enough. So there was certainly some wounding there. Also, most of my siblings . . . had had some hard paths, so for me, I had a heavier weight of being perfect and needed to be perfect, successful. And it turns out I’m not perfect and . . . if I’m not perfect, then I’m not worthy of love. If I’m a work in progress, I’m not worth having; I’m not worth loving.

As demonstrated by Tim, a simple event such as being asked to clean some rags can trigger an experience of feeling shame and not worthy of love. However, once the nugget has been identified, curiosity and love can be focused on that particular aspect of the past, and a healing process engaged to work towards its release and composting. Rather than having this type of experience turn into a fight, or in his case a break-up, energy can be redirected toward one’s own roots and soil and turned into an opportunity for deeper self-knowledge, discovery, and healing.
The ownership process is one of the most powerful tools that is introduced in EOL, and was named by many of the participants as transformative. Nalini, who had grown up feeling she had “no tools” for working with her emotions, talked about how it helped her develop a sense of competency, saying, “I can feel crazy and then take a step back and follow the trigger method and trace it down. Why do I feel that way? Where is it coming from? I can do that.” When Elyse entered EOL, she was experiencing extreme emotional reactions, without knowing how to work with them effectively:

I think it was when I almost broke down and screamed in the grocery store that I knew that my emotions were really coming to the surface... If I didn’t have this I felt like I might just implode. I mean, I just had so much emotion that I was carrying around and I didn’t have any outlet before then.

She talked about how the ownership process was transformative for her:

The trigger talks? That was like the start of stepping back. And being like, “Wow I’m really charged right now. Why? What’s really sitting with that?” Sometimes it took a few days to get to what was going on.

With the support of the village, Elyse developed a competency for tracking her emotions and allowing them to release and move in a healthy way.

Regina described how the process supported her specifically in tracking the triggers that were happening in her romantic partnership. At the time she was feeling impacted by “the simplest little things about how I kept our house or where I put my sweater when I came in the door or whatever. “ She was able to track through the ownership process that these triggers “shot right down to a wound of mine of not being capable,” which connected to her “dad’s voice and the patterns of being told that what I was doing wasn’t right and then just having years of carrying around a little defense mechanism.” As a result, she discovered that she had developed a pattern of pushing people away—“I would decide that I don’t need them anymore in my life and could just
go ahead and do things the way I did them and that’s fine. That I didn’t need to change.”

Engaging in the trigger ownership process changed her perspective on this. She was able to unhook her experience from her partner’s actions, and also from her father, and to not only bring compassion to herself but also to others:

It changed my relationships immediately . . . helping me take ownership and responsibility in my part with all my relationships. And seeing people with a lot of compassion, because as soon as I knew what was happening in me and really recognizing the patterns in me, I just know there’s a whole world going on inside everybody and a whole lifetime, or many lifetimes, of stories that are just in there.

This process not only transformed Regina’s partnership but all of her relationships, as she realized that she no longer had to protect herself by pushing others away.

Jeff M. had an important realization about triggers, saying, “From what I understood . . . much like our body heals, we’re trying to heal ourselves, so we’re showing ourselves over and over again . . . here’s this thing, see it? There it is again!” As Jeff points out, often the reason that the trigger keeps occurring is because there is something underneath that needs to be noticed so that it can be released and healed. The pattern that Jeff identified and wanted to heal during EOL was of repeatedly choosing women who were unavailable for relationships. Jeff was able to track this back to his childhood experience of his mother being emotionally unavailable to him. He took this one step further, and instead of blaming his mother, realized that this was sourced in his mother’s own nuggets of having had her mother die when she was age 2, her father when she was 12, and having been sexually abused. He engaged this by having a ceremony to forgive his mother. He said, “I’m going to offer unconditional love, so I obviously had to do that to myself, but that’s what I wanted to unfold. Instead of this unavailability that I was experiencing.” In this way, he gained the insight and self-awareness to transform his
romantic relationships by choosing available women. In addition, he was able to take the experience as a mirror to look at his own patterns, and ask, “How am I unavailable? Oh yea, there have been ways where I’ve been unavailable to my daughters. That wasn’t my intention. . . . I was just following out the program, so to speak.” As a result, he became more available as a father, and began an important process of healing the ancestral nuggets that were in the roots and soil systems of his parents.

The trigger tracking or ownership process is not always a simple one to work with—particularly when in the height of a reaction it can be difficult to remember to take the first step to just pause and notice what’s happening. And even if one trigger is tracked and resolved, there are always a host of others waiting to receive our attention. However, it gets easier with time and experience, as we learn to see those triggers as gifts or opportunities—or as one group donned them, “Trigger Treats.” With practice, it is a way to cultivate awareness and consciously engage a healing path that can lead to greater freedom and peace within oneself, in relationship with others, and in the world at large.

A Foundation for the Transformation Journey

With the practices described in this chapter, the individual is able to complete a thorough “interior landscape assessment” of their own roots and soil system. This map, combined with tools for identifying and tracking one’s patterns, thoughts, and behaviors, is the first step towards healing and releasing some of the “nuggets” in the soil. In the next two chapters, we will examine how EOL participants found further support for their healing through cultivating a deeper relationship with the natural world and through being part of a village.
CHAPTER NINE: HEALING WITH NATURE

In this chapter, I discuss my findings regarding the role that nature connection plays in the EOL participants’ healing journey. The sit spot, described in Part Two, is the primary practice for developing nature connection in the Ecology of Leadership. Core concepts discussed in this chapter include being held by our bigger body, cultivating mindfulness and presence, and remembering that we are nature.

**Being Held by our Bigger Body**

The first unifying theme participants discussed regarding the role of nature connection in the EOL healing journey is the idea of being “held by our bigger body.” In this section I will discuss some of the theory that explains this phenomenon together with some of the core findings based on the experiences of participants.

**Healing of the Mother Wound**

From a psychological perspective, the human being’s first “nugget” or core wounding experience occurs at the moment of birth. After nine months of experiencing connection and a sense of oneness with the mother in the womb, we are abruptly shot into this world and immediately severed from her by the cutting of the umbilical cord. According to Hedva (2006), in rites of passage, “Separation is the first stage of initiation.” (p. 54). The universal experience of literal severance from the biological mother means that every human’s entry into the world can be framed as a rite of passage and an initiation. Hedva proposes that this experience creates the foundational wound that
drives the human’s quest to re-experience and recreate a sense of connection and wholeness throughout life.

If we consider the concept of healing with the natural world in this context, the analogy of the earth as the great mother is profound. Nature connection becomes a gateway to healing the essential mother wound. Hedva (2006) writes, “we can use the power of introjection…to experience the archetype Mother Nature directly” (p. 52). If the individual is able to have this experience of the natural world as mother, then the potential exists to re-experience that sense of oneness we are longing for through our connection with nature.

Susan described having this experience in her sit spot:

Yeah it’s feeling like I’m being very literally held by the land. Like having that experience of being one part of a whole . . . its literally like laying down on this amazing bed of comforting, um, like, mommy (Laughing). That’s what it feels like, it feels like hanging out with Mom.

This experience can be cultivated, such that the more one develops a deep nature connection practice, the more one can feel connected and “at home” wherever he or she goes in the world.
**Being Held by the Land**

Other participants shared Susan’s experience of “earth as mother” and that feeling of being “held by the land.” Rather than feeling like they have to face their emotional healing and grieving process alone, they develop a relationship in which they can safely emote and be held by the land. Lauren talked about the feeling of being held by earth’s gravity during a sit spot at Commonweal Garden in Bolinas:

> When I think of that meadow across highway 1, what I love about my sits there are actually laying in that grass . . . and really, really feeling the earth hold me and feeling that added gratitude for gravity and knowing that the earth is spinning, but I’m not actually going to fall, thanks to physics that are going to hold me onto the planet. And to rest in the bigness of her.

The concept that gravity is actually Mother Earth’s way of holding us close to her is a beautiful image. I resonate with Lauren’s experience, having myself arrived many times in that same meadow full of emotions, and having felt safe time and time again to just lie down on the earth and give it all over to be held by the “big Mama.”

**Being Loved by Nature**

A third aspect of feeling held by our bigger body is the possibility to actually feel loved by nature. Tim spoke about this:

> I would go and I’d sit in this tree. The tree was almost like a giraffe. It was a huge Cyprus. I would straddle one of the branches—a huge branch that went out like a dinosaur neck. I would sit there and watch the valley, and the sun would be setting. I felt loved by the landscape. I felt loved by that tree. I felt held…I felt like it was an important part of that healing process to learn how to be loved by nature. . . . I am very much part of nature and allowing myself to connect with it. . . . So it felt like for me, it was just getting to that place where I was able to feel loved by the landscape and that for me, strengthened my ability to love myself.
The kind of relationship that Tim is suggesting here is an intimate one, in which the idea of being loved by the natural world is not abstract but an actual felt experience. By experiencing himself as loved by nature, Tim learned how to better love himself.

Opening the Heart

Once safely connected to the earth as mother and feeling held by the land (and in some cases loved by nature), participants find that they are able to open up their hearts and experience the fullness of their emotions in a more direct way. Susan said,

I feel like that nature connection was such a catalyst for me in so many ways of just really getting in touch with deeper emotions…just being able to sit in stillness and have whatever was present come up. . . . A lot of it for me was grief.

Through the Ecology of Leadership, I have learned that no matter what is moving for me emotionally, I can take it to the land. There are many times during EOL weekends, even as a facilitator, where the place that I feel best able to open my heart has been during the sit spot. The metaphor of composting nuggets takes on extra potency with the literal experience of releasing emotions through one’s tears into the soil.

Susan also spoke about how nature connection opened her not only to her grief but to “intense heart expansion” and to “crazy joy,” saying,
Something about being on that cliff and being able to look out over the ocean . . . and that expanse of it going out into infinity. That really just cracked my heart open. And I don’t know what it was exactly but my heart just opened and there was so much love and connection.

This sentiment is supported by the poet, Terry Tempest Williams (1994), who says, “There is no defense against an open heart . . . in dialogue with wilderness.”

The sit spot practice and nature connection thus takes on an important role in the participants’ emotional healing journey, as they learn to experience the natural world as a safe space for being held, releasing emotions, and opening the heart.

**Cultivating Mindfulness and Presence**

The second theme in the data regarding the role of nature connection in the healing process is centered on the topic of cultivating mindfulness and presence. Nature connection has been proven to have a similar benefit to meditation and mindfulness practice in terms of its impact on cultivating mental clarity, producing positive brain pathways, and helping to reduce cortisol and promote healthy hormonal balance (Selhub and Logan, 2012). In the following sub-sections, I will discuss how the sit spot helped participants to cultivate mindfulness and presence.

**Learning to Be Present With What Is**

The concept of “learning to be with what is,” as described in EOL, means cultivating the individual’s ability to be present and observe whatever is happening at a given moment, both externally and internally. Many scholars and spiritual teachers refer to this concept simply as “presence.” Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers (2008)
speak to the importance of this quality, saying, “the core capacity needed to access the
field of the future is presence” (p. 13).

The sit spot is an excellent opportunity for individuals to practice presence, as no
matter what the conditions, the instructions are simply to observe what is happening both
outside in the natural world and in one’s own inner process. Inherent to this practice is
also being in Rumi’s Field—meeting our experience with curiosity rather than judgment.
Carle spoke about how the sit spot helped her to slow down and develop an awareness of
what is happening:

Having a core routine like sit spot really helped me to slow down and pay
attention in a different way. And to notice that it’s a very different experience to
be going through a hike through nature and be talking to someone while you’re
doing that, than it is to sit by yourself in calm and just let whatever comes come,
and be paying special attention to your senses and what are you smelling and
tasting and feeling in your body, and seeing and hearing.

Carle makes an important distinction about the sit spot—because of the nature of sitting,
she was able to experience her senses and body in a way that had not previously been
accessible through other nature activities like hiking. The aspect of sitting in the sit spot
practice is essential to the practice of learning to be present with what is.

**Removing the Obstacles to Presence**

For many participants, just coming to a place of stillness in order to be able to
observe and be present is a huge obstacle. Regina said, “For a long time sit spot was just
straight up hard. It was just my mind’s chatter.’ Lauren agreed, saying, “Inevitably I
would arrive at EOL with so much monkey mind chatter and so much like, oh my god, I
don’t have time to be here this weekend. I have so much to do and how is this going to
work?” Carl also spoke about how he couldn’t be still in his mind or body before EOL:
Before I came into EOL one of the things . . . was that I couldn’t sit still. And it’s that noise in the attic, I think that’s really what it was, that my mind wouldn’t let me sit still because I didn’t like myself and I’m not going to sit there by myself for 25 minutes, it’s not good company. So I was feeling antsy, and it was everywhere, I’d drive down somewhere to San Francisco and drive out to the most beautiful outlook—just looking at the ocean—and I wanted more than anything to just sit there for three hours and just be, but I couldn’t. It’s part of this type A personality that had been drilled into me in the corporate world.

Carl highlights a few important points here—that his inability to sit was connected to the fact that he felt he didn’t like himself, and also that it was related to the “type A” personality that made him a success in the corporate world.

For Nalini, just the aspect of being in intimate relationship with the natural world was foreign to her prior to coming to EOL, and brought up a range of emotions:

It was a huge edge for me. So, again, coming from a very analytical background, my parents—my whole family—we’re not really nature people. . . . I have frustration with bugs and while I really like wildlife, I like to go home and sleep in my bed. I’ve never been camping before. So the first time I did a whole (EOL) weekend . . . and I actually pitched a tent. That night was really hard for me, but I’m glad I did it. I actually spent the whole night crying inside the tent, by myself, because I found it to be really isolating.

Susan also talked about fears that arose for her when practicing her sit spot. She was serving as a member of the alumni facilitation team when she had an experience of
wanting to run out of the meadow. Because she was keeping time for the team, she had to stay there and just be with and watch the emotions that arose. She described it this way:

I just had so much fear and anxiety come up. And I just wanted to run, like get up and bolt. And I’m the one who’s keeping time! And it was just so ironic and perfect so I just kept sitting with it. And I think in the end it transformed and it shifted. Because I feel like if I sit with an emotion long enough it ultimately shifts. So . . . that was really powerful because I think it was an opportunity to confront my fear in a really gentle way. I don’t even know what I was scared about.

Because she was forced to stay in the sit spot, Susan was able to just observe the feeling, which led to it eventually shifting and the fear releasing.

**Cultivating Stillness**

Susan demonstrates here what becomes possible when we just stay with our experience and learn to be with it. And for each of the participants described in the above section, as they stayed with the practice of the sit spot, they were able to find a gateway through to presence. Regina shared that now she “can really go and drop in and see things more than I could then. . . . It’s kind of a journey to quieting the mind.” Lauren took the opportunity to use the sit spot as a chance to give her anxiety and worry to the earth and get them out of her head:

Basically giving all of that to the earth and just saying I’m here, it’s totally fine. I don’t know what I was worrying about. And this is always true. And that’s what sit spot is for me. This chance to remove my head.

Through the course of EOL and by engaging the sit spot, Nalini evolved from that experience of isolation and fear to the point of feeling comfortable having insects crawling on her:

I’m super amazed at one, how not nervous I am about having bugs crawl on me (now), which was a huge issue for me, and two about how much you can really learn if you just sit in one spot and not think, but just see. And that goes for sit
spot, that goes for life. It’s not just about nature. It’s about sitting and detaching yourself from what’s going on and just observing. What do I see? What do I hear?

As she states, the sit spot became useful for her not just while in nature but in learning how to be present and observe throughout her life. Carl also shared that the sit spot helped him with “Being still, observing and looking to the metaphors. Michelle also spoke about how the sit spot helped her to quiet her overactive intellectual mind:

A lot of modern people would reflect back to me or have reflected back to me that a strength of my construct, my personality, my leadership is this analytical mind, this intellect. And I was cultured to lead with that . . . it was so powerful, this lopsided leading with that kind of mind; it was like a prison. So, sit spot was the biggest and first, and continues on a daily basis to be a liberation, especially when I get trapped there.

Michelle’s framing of the sit spot as a path to liberation from the prison of the mind is striking, particularly in a culture in which leadership from the mind is highly valued.

**Presence, Mindfulness and Modern Day Disorders**

As depicted humorously in Figure 10.4, but documented with great gravity by Richard Louv (2005) in *Last Child in the Woods*, North American children are suffering from an increasing rate of “nature deficit disorder”—which can be linked to a variety of other afflictions, ranging from physical health, to mental and emotional wellness, to learning disabilities. In particular, research shows that a lack of nature connection is linked to attention deficit disorders such as ADD and ADHD; as an antidote, nature connection is a potent remedy. The more time spent outside, the better individuals with these conditions fare. Selhub and Logan (2012) document the recent research demonstrating that individuals with regular exposure to nature have higher attention levels and also better academic performance. They also document a study that shows that
having regular play in green areas helps to reduce the symptoms of attention deficit significantly. There is also emerging evidence that autism and autism spectrum disorder can be both prevented and treated through deep nature connection. A recent study showed that autistic children have significantly lower levels of Vitamin D in their systems, indicating that it is connected to a lack of time spent outdoors in the sun.

Another study showed that children with exposure to UVB rays in the summer had half the rates of autism of children without sun exposure (Savedge, 2013). Young (2012) goes a step further to claim that nature deficit disorder and a multi-generational lack of deep nature connection due to modernization and urbanization is at the source of the skyrocketing prevalence of autism today, which he says manifests as autistic children having specific challenges with intimacy and interpersonal connection. Tracking the correlations between mental, emotional, and physical health and deep nature connection is a critical new frontier.

*We are Nature*

The third major area of findings regarding participants’ healing through nature connection in EOL can be described as the notion that “we are nature.” This is a simple but profound realization—that rather than the natural world being something “out there,”
it is something of which we are inherently a part. Thus developing deep nature
connection includes developing a connection and unity with the self as part of that greater
whole. According to John Davis (2006), this is the foundation of the discipline of
ecopsychology. He writes,

Ecopsychology is founded on three insights. (1) There is a deeply bonded
relationship between humans and nature. (2) The dissociation of humans and
nature leads to suffering both for the environment (ecological devastation) and for
humans (arrested human development, grief, despair, anxiety, or alienation). (3)
Realizing and deepening the connection between humans and nature is healing for
both.

Leroy Little Bear (2000) discusses this teaching from an Indigenous perspective, saying,
“The Earth cannot be separated from the actual being of Indians. The Earth is where the
continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs” (p. 78). As framed by another
traditional teaching, Berry (1999) explains that:

In the Chinese expression of the ‘One Body’ we are told by Wang Yang-Ming in
the 16th century: ‘everything from ruler, minister, husband, wife, and friends to
mountains, rivers, heavenly and earthly spirits, birds, animals, and plants, all
should be truly loved in order to realize my humanity that forms a unity, and then
my clear character will be completely manifested, and I will really form one body
with Heaven Earth, and the myriad things. (p. 193)

This concept appears across the teachings of many spiritual and wisdom traditions, and
was evidenced by the EOL participants.

**Everything is Nature**

The feeling of being at one with nature is common to many EOL participants. In
his prior description of being held by the tree, Tim describes the realization that he is
“very much a part of nature.” It is the fact that he feels loved by the tree, and that he is
nature, that enables him to learn to also love himself. Carle said, “I’m nature, and there’s
nothing out of place in nature; it all has a place.” In EOL, this understanding that we are nature means embracing not only the positive and loving aspects of nature and of ourselves, but also the dark and shadow sides—for just as nature is creative and life-giving, it is also destructive and takes life, all in service of a greater balance. Learning that we are nature means learning to love all of ourselves. Jeff M. spoke about how the realization that he is part of nature allowed him to accept himself more fully in his own process of evolution:

   Somewhere along the way I started thinking about this notion of, well, we’re nature . . . so everything we do is nature. . . . We can unfold as part of nature. . . . And so . . . nature is actually driving all of this. There’s no part that’s outside of it.

As Brian Swimme said, “This is the greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: You take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebuds, giraffes and humans” (Bridle, 2003). This quote, often cited in EOL by James Stark, indicates that we are all in a natural state of unfolding evolution—and thus part of a greater cosmic story.

**Nature as Mirror—Internal Reflects External**

Another aspect of our being nature that emerged from the research is that our inner worlds are reflected in the outer world. In EOL, this concept is understood literally—that our external experience mirrors the energies we are carrying within us. This is the foundation for the Tree Model. Cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien speaks to this concept, saying, “Each person is touched by nature and in silence in their own unique way . . . in many ways the outer is really a mirror of what the person is doing internally” (Schlitz et al., 2007, p. 57). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the sit spot. Kyle spoke about this from personal experience:
There’s the tool of using nature as a mirror as a guide, and that being everything all the time, not just being a sit spot. Everything is nature. Having that realization. . . . It’s always self-referral. What you sow you shall reap . . . taking it seriously. Trusting that it’s nature showing you . . . your outer world becomes your inner world. It’s showing you right now how you’re being. It’s like that to me is definitely something that’s really stuck with me.

Regina also talked about how she learned to use this principle as an indicator for her internal state, saying, “It’s great to just sit and connect and look at what’s out there and see the mirrors that nature holds and see how nature reacted to me when I was in different moods.” In some cases this could be a matter of projection or perception—that when we are in a state of inner turmoil, we perceive the outer world in this way, and vice versa. However, there are also direct examples of the natural world responding in a different way based on the human’s inner state. For example, many participants told stories of how if they entered their sit spot in a state of peace, they would experience the natural world in a state of baseline and normal buzzing of activity as their presence would not be received as a disturbance. Whereas if they entered in turmoil they would be surrounded by a lot of animals in a state of high alert or alarm, or silence (the animals and birds having been scared away).
As Kyle indicates, this concept applies not just while in the sit, but as we go through our daily lives—the inner reflecting the outer, and vice versa. The emerging science on mirror neurons in the brain supports this phenomenon on a scientific level. We are literally wired to be mirrors of the world around us—if an individual laughs, we are likely to also laugh or experience joy; if they are angry, we reflect that emotion. These neurons help a baby learn to imitate his or her parents and support us as adults as we connect with one another. The same concept can be extended to the natural world—not only do we have an impact on the external world, but also, we are influenced by it. In this sense, we become the natural world and intimate reflectors of the environment we inhabit. Therefore, if we want to experience greater inner peace, immersing ourselves in natural environments conducive to healing is critical to our well-being.

In this chapter, we have reviewed the healing possibilities of collaboration with the natural world. In the next chapter, I will extend this concept of healing with our bigger body to look at what becomes possible by healing with a village.
CHAPTER TEN: HEALING WITH THE VILLAGE

One of the most powerful aspects of the Ecology of Leadership is the experience of healing in and with a village. For many participants, this is their first time being in a circle that is consciously committing to support, witness, and hold one another while each person engages their individual healing path. Participants reported feeling safe to be vulnerable, and consequently more able to be their authentic selves. The healing of the individual is amplified and supported through the healing of the whole, resulting in a process of collective healing.

**Being Held by the Village**

The first core principle of healing in the village is learning to “be held,” and to hold one another. Crowley and Lodge (2004) discuss how we are designed to be social and emotional creatures, saying,

> We evolved as social pack animals, like wolves and dolphins. It’s not a choice; our survival depends on being part of a group. No one has ever gone into the Amazon jungle and found an isolated person; it’s always a tribe. There is no such thing as a solitary human in nature, because isolation is fatal. We were designed to be emotional creatures, which is to say that we are mammals. (p. 245)

As stated in a slogan of one of RDI’s other programs, Regenerative Design and Nature Awareness, “Holding one another is a survival skill.” This is more than a trite saying, as evidenced by Crowley and Lodge (2004), who go on to explain that

> Complex emotions, from the limbic brain, are the reason mammals succeeded. . . . We are social and emotional creatures from start to finish. . . . Mammals invented love, joy, pleasure and play, all of which are enshrined in our DNA, in the chemical and neurological pathways in our limbic brains. . . . What’s the biological point of love or friendship, of being happy, sad, optimistic or
enthusiastic? Why invest extra energy in building a whole new level of brain structures? The answer is to work together. (p. 245)

Therefore, having participants learn to support one another and be connected within a village context is essential to the healing journey. This process begins with the decision to trust the circle, and builds through learning skills such as witnessing one another and learning to ask for what we each need for our healing.

**Trusting the Circle**

Coming to trust the circle as a safe place for one’s healing journey is both a decision, and an evolving aspect of the process that develops out of one’s experience. Individuals often resist the choice to trust the village; however, that trust is transformative once the decision is made. Laura described this, saying, “The main thing that started this (transformation) process for me was choosing to trust the circle.” She explained that this was difficult for her at first, but she knew she needed it for her healing:

I said yes to EOL, because of an awareness around my challenge of being in circle, my challenge of being in community. . . . I knew that I needed that container to lean in and move up against people and be with what the wound in me is and heal that.

This paid off for Laura, who described her experience in the circle as “the most potent thing about the whole journey.” She said, “Just staying with it and showing up for the
experience of being in a group was so, a million times, profound and magical and healing and completely worth it.” This journey from isolation and the belief that one can hold it all together on their own to trusting others to hold them is central to many participants’ EOL process.

For some individuals, such as Elyse, trust is built slowly by starting with more intimate rings of the circle, such as the buddy relationship or the small groups. By being encouraged to share in small groups, she developed the comfort to be able to move toward sharing in the larger group. Donna, on the other hand, felt able to trust the group rather quickly. She said,

I can’t emphasize enough the safety I felt in that container. It’s literally like being suspended and held by people so you can completely let go and relax and just be who you are, whether that’s expressing joy in the moment, or fear—whatever it is. To be able to do that un-selfconsciously with all those mirrors around you in that room. Again, it’s that community piece. It’s so powerful.

As shared by Macy and Johnstone (2012), building trust takes time:

A group we feel at home in is small enough that we know one another’s names and share common interests, even a common purpose. Feeling at home in such a group isn’t always immediate; it can take time to build trust and a sense of ease. (p. 128)

The trust building process in EOL begins from the moment people arrive on the land, is set by the agreements ceremony, and continues to build throughout the program. Some participants, like Donna, are able to trust the circle fairly quickly; others may wait until the program is nearly over before they really “test” the container to see if it can hold them. However, with multiple layers of circles within the wider circle, participants can begin to build trust at the level they are comfortable with, moving up eventually to the whole group. As Macy and Johnstone go on to say,
When we feel the bond of common cause and reciprocal support, we have a powerful setting for synergy. . . . A group we feel at home in can support us through remarkable personal transformation. Our interactions change when we feel safe enough to let go of defensiveness, allowing us to become more open to one another and to life. (p. 128)

Sharing Our Stories and Listening Deeply to One Another

An important aspect of the EOL healing journey is learning to share one’s experiences and healing path with others in the circle, rather than keeping one’s story to oneself. When talking about vulnerable emotional content, intimate life experiences, and one’s most heartfelt visions, speaking in front of a circle of people can require a great deal of courage. However, the power of stepping forward and sharing one’s story is transformative. It brings the experiences out of the “shadows” or out from under the surface and invites the opportunity to be seen and “witnessed” by others.

This aspect of witnessing, or being present observers for one another’s sharing, is a significant component of the healing journey. As Regina said, “…being witnessed in the circle all the time, sitting with 30 people and sharing and hearing other people’s stories as well and just healing with people was really powerful for me.” From an Indigenous cultural perspective, the importance of witnessing is seen in many of the community practices, including ceremony, storytelling, and sharing or talking circles. Being seen and witnessed at important moments of rites of passage as well as in our stories and heart sharing is a critical part of being in the village and supporting one another.

This includes not just being witnessed, but also learning to deeply listen to and be a witness and support for others. Carl said,
I wasn’t always a deep listener. I needed to be heard and didn’t realize the therapeutic values of deep listening or how I could help someone by just sitting there and being very present. . . . I applied that countless times during and after EOL, I continue to. It’s been a tremendous gift.

Participants have the opportunity to learn and practice witnessing and deep listening skills at the different levels of interaction within the village, beginning in the buddy pairs.

Susan said,

I learned how powerful it is just to have someone witness—or just to witness for—another person . . . in the context of the buddy relationship it wasn’t like I was trying to help anyone solve their issues. It was like I was just really seeing that person for who they were and loving them, you know? So that was great and that was powerful for me. Like, you don’t have to fix anything, we’re just here we’re just connected and doing this together.

Susan brings forward a beautiful point about the practice of deep listening in EOL—when we are holding one another in Rumi’s Field, we can just be present and listen to each other—there is nothing wrong, and no need to fix anything. This is deeply healing, and creates the safe space in which people know that they will be accepted no matter what they share. Carl went on to say,

I think part of it is the gift of giving which is simply the act of listening but also one of my edges continues to be receiving, so the buddy relationship has always been a really powerful opportunity for practicing that art of receiving and really trusting that person has the best interest and loves you and is there to support you…it’s just such a foreign concept in society. That I think is part of why it gets traction so quickly is because people are starving for this opportunity to open up and be heard outside a therapist’s office or their best friend who’s just going to go “yeah, oh right” and not really listening.
For some people, EOL is the first place in which they feel truly listened to and heard, and able to trust others with their intimate truth, and also in which they can practice being present with others in this way. For example, Tim talked about how it felt to share this and to ‘test’ the container in sharing the story about his conflict with his girlfriend:

I felt like we had created a safe container, but there was still a lot of fear around being witnessed and being transparent with what was going on and really saying things about myself. But . . . one thing that we had been talking about a lot was the power of being witnessed, the power of being held and what can happen when you allow yourself to be witnessed and held.

Yea, it was scary and I felt like it was important. And what ended up happening is I was completely held and loved.

As we will see in a later section, as each person develops the courage to step into the circle and be witnessed, it contributes to the healing of the whole.

*Asking for What We Need and Offering Support*

Part of learning to be held by the circle is learning to trust that the village can help meet the individuals’ needs, or support them to get those needs met. Again, rather than believing that we have to take care of ourselves and our needs alone, we can open ourselves to the possibility of being radically met and supported by the village. Often after an individual steps forward to share their story, to bring something vulnerable to the circle, or to be witnessed in their goals and visions, the person is asked to share what kind of help they might need, or how they would like to be supported. Individuals are encouraged to be bold in really asking for what they want from the village.

This requires courage, and for many is an unpracticed skill. Carl shared how this was an edge for him upon entering EOL, saying, “Just this act of asking, ‘Is there
anything I can do to help support you?’ hasn’t always been a really easy question for me to answer or concept for me to grasp.” Lauren also talked about how this was hard for her at first:

Asking for help, oh my gosh. What a great tool that has been in EOL. I mean, early on I remember Christopher, James asking the group, you know, check in with yourself and find out if you need some support around that. And I just sort of cringed. I don’t need some support. And realizing that I need a lot of support and it feels really good to ask actually. On the flip side, if I can, it feels really good to give support, so why wouldn’t I ask for support. So that’s a huge tool right there.

Lauren makes a few important points—often peoples’ first response is “I don’t need support”—as they have been conditioned that leadership or competence equates to not needing help, being able to do it on your own, “having it together,” etc. To admit that we all need help and support is a major aspect of the shift to a village mentality. In addition, as individuals begin to learn how good it feels to give support to others in the circle, they also become more receptive to receiving.

Regina talked about how her experience of learning to ask for what she needed very specifically, and being met in that, has now stayed with her as a skill that she can offer to others.

I remember saying . . . “I need to sit on the ground, this patch of grass, and put my head down and have someone hold my back and facilitate this letting go” . . . and having someone that’s just willing to do whatever you need…and it was like, yea let’s do that . . . the skill really transferred. . . . Now I can sit with people and be like, what do you need right now? Do you need to sit out here? Do you need to scream and let it out? Do you need to just be heard in silence? Do you need to be held? It’s vast and open.

I was able to practice this skill just a few days ago, while writing this chapter. At the beginning of what I knew would be a long day of writing, I wrote an email to the current EOL-12 circle, telling them that I was planning on a marathon writing day and would love to receive their support. I received 22 emails that day from the group, wishing me
well and sending me support, tips, and encouragement. I had my most productive day to date, and rather than feeling alone as I sat at my computer for 12 hours straight, I could feel the power of the collective with me and holding me.

**Collective Healing**

As participants learn to trust the circle and develop the skills to engage the village, the possibility opens for the collective healing process to begin. Participants realize that they are not alone in their healing path, and that the healing of others is also their healing. They feel what it is like to be part of a “bigger body” or village.

**We Are Not Alone**

Coming from an individualistic society, it is easy to believe that we are alone in our experience and in our struggles. Carl spoke about how he entered EOL with that mentality:

You come into a circle, at least for me anyways, thinking, “Oh I must be the only one who’s suffering from this or that. I’m the only one in the world who has these problems. I’m the only one in the world that came from alcoholic parents.” Or whatever. And then to realize very quickly you’re not alone. And the problems we have are very similar. They just have different names and happened in different places. We all have similar wounds.

For many participants, realizing that they are “not alone” is a major “aha” moment. Anna also spoke to this, saying that through EOL,

I stopped feeling alone. I stopped feeling “I’m the only person who feels like this. Why is my life like this?” It gave me a broader vision of my life. Everyone’s doing the same thing, which is really good.
By being able to see their struggles mirrored in the experience of others, participants feel more connected. Ericka talked about how witnessing others dealing with similar issues helped in her healing.

I would relate to what other people were saying. Oh she’s passing through that and I passed through that too, in a different way, but very similar issues. . . . So that kind of connection helped heal what I was passing through too.

Hearing that we are not alone helps us to bring more acceptance and curiosity to our own nuggets, because they no longer feel as shameful or like something we have to hide away. If I hear someone else have the courage to speak about something like having a parent die at a young age, then I may be able to find the courage to bring forward my own experience with this. This leads us into the next section, on how in the village the individual’s healing becomes that of others in the circle.

**Your Healing is My Healing**

One of the key concepts central to healing in the village is that the healing of one can be the healing of all. From the perspectives of bioremediation and systems theory, when one part of the system begins to heal, it has an impact on the whole system. Sometimes this is because the experience that a person brings forward is similar to ones held by others in the circle, as in the case of the alcoholic household discussed above.
Often one person’s discussion of a nugget’s healing, can move similar nuggets for others.

As described by Goodman in her article on “Becoming Human,” the African word “Ubuntu” means, “A person is a person through other people” (p. 47).

Regina talked about realizing that “my story’s in their story. . . . And you can heal with someone, that they’re touching a wound that’s really similar to one that I carry.”

Sometimes people have had similar experiences; in other cases, people may bring different aspects of the healing of a whole story. For example, in the case of Tim’s conflict with his girlfriend, he was bringing forward a vulnerable and honest expression of what it meant for him to be a man. He was afraid to do this, but took a chance, and found that the village not only held him but related to his experience:

The expectation that maybe people were going to think poorly of me and judge me and people were going to think I was a bad guy. It turns out, no, that’s not the story at all. People had related to that and had been there and had seen it and had similar stories and it was healing to them to have it be present. My healing was their healing. It felt really good, hard and good . . . vulnerable.

Tim’s sharing was healing not just for him, but also for others, as people identified with his story. An elderly woman in the group, who had never trusted men, shared that to see this young man in such a heartfelt expression of his healing was deeply healing for her. She could forgive her father, and the other men in her life, because of the way that Tim shared his experience. In turn, Tim felt received by love and forgiveness, and was able to heal from his experience without having to have a specific process with his ex-girlfriend.

Anna spoke about how she experienced “collective healing” for the first time in EOL, saying:

One person’s healing was with the collective. I’ve heard about it, I know that it can happen, but I’ve never seen it. And that for me was just huge. It was powerful to know that can be created.
Anna had a similar experience to that of the older woman who found healing with Tim—for her, it was having an experience of feeling witnessed by an older male in the circle. She said, “It was around my dad and having an old male see me and say things about my being in the world that my father will never be able to say to me.” Having been estranged from her father for years, she felt that that incident that “really healed something that . . . I wouldn’t have been able to get from my family.”

Donna talked about how she was able to work through a trigger just by watching others in the circle going through a healing process:

I remember sitting in a session one time and there was kind of a clearing going on between a couple people and I felt myself getting triggered, and I just sat with it and sat with it. And just took in their process. And by the end of that, I was so not triggered. I don’t really remember exactly what happened. Again it was that power of witnessing somebody else’s experience and having my own at the same time, and almost like parallel processes going on . . . In the end, we all came through the other side. Everybody had this breakthrough. And I was wondering, I wonder if everyone in the group’s doing this right now.

Many times as people are sitting in a group process in the yurt, an individual may be sharing about or working through their own personal issue, but it triggers and catalyzes the healing and sharing of others in the circle as well. Sometimes this is between specific individuals, and sometimes, as Lauren points out, “there’s something that happens more collectively, where a lot of us are experiencing a healing or a shift.” In the second case, there is more of a collective shift or changing of the field or system itself, in which the overall consciousness or ecology of the group qualitatively changes. In both cases, the healing of one is connected to the healing of all who are present.
**Healing as the Bigger Body**

Part of the definition of the village as a healing collective is that it functions together as a “bigger body.” This means that the group together holds a power and synergy that is larger than the collection of individuals themselves or the “sum of the parts.” As an ecology of diverse human beings, the group holds collective wisdom and with that a healing power. Lauren talked about how she experienced this in the circle:

Sometimes we’re there as a group to hold one person’s important breakthrough and that by being holders of this space and resting in the bigger body, we actually see that that wouldn’t have come about if we hadn’t all been there in that way.

As Lauren points out, it is the unique combination of the individuals who are the circle being present, all together, that makes the healing process possible. Donna also talked about this, saying, “With all those mirrors around you, of all the different people, of all those hearts, eyes, minds right there . . . there’s just so many possibilities really.” As is often said in EOL, it is the “unique constellation” of a particular group of individuals that creates the ecology of each EOL village.

Lauren also talked about how she noticed that the EOL leaders would let the group find its own rhythm—for example if someone is working through an issue in a group process setting, and it begins to feel uncomfortable, there is a tendency for others to want the instructors to “fix it”—however, part of the EOL facilitation ethic is to allow the circle to find its own way. She described this:

When other people in the room are itching and feel that someone has to jump in here and quote unquote “fix this,” and Christopher and James say, “Wait, wait, wait. Let’s just see what’s going to happen.” And then something inevitably does because the bigger body knows how to care for itself, right?
Lauren learned by being a member of the alumni facilitation team “to start seeing that I can trust the bigger body as a facilitator also, not just as a participant. That the bigger body is even going to help me as we’re kind of trying to steer the ship.”

This is not always a comfortable process. However, in my experience on the facilitation team, an essential part of the building of the village healing ecology is to allow the circle to find its own way and to also go through a process of breakdown and breakthrough as a group. As I shared in response to Lauren during our interview,

There’s something powerful also . . . what you’re saying about systems. You need to get to a certain point of explosion and compost and there’s a messiness that creates a space for greater growth. I witnessed that last week at EOL-9, when a challenge arose. I think through that process there was a dropping into vulnerability and connection that made it one of the most powerful circles to date. That circle ended so incredibly strong. Beauty in the breakdown.

When the container is tested, and holds, it leads to deeper connection and the strengthening of the circle. This brings us to the next section, on “being seen,” and the role of vulnerability and authenticity in the EOL healing process.

**Being Seen—The Role of Authenticity and Vulnerability**

One of the most significant and unexpected findings of my research is on the role of vulnerability and authenticity in a transformation process. It is not just being in a group that makes the EOL healing journey powerful and effective—it is being in a certain *quality* of community in which participants feel able to be vulnerable and able to become their most authentic selves and leaders in the world. In this section, I discuss how the greater expression of each of these became possible for participants through their experience in the EOL village.
**Authenticity**

Brené Brown (2010) defines authenticity as “the daily practice of letting go who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are” (p. 50). As she indicates, authenticity is not just a “feeling”—it is a practice. Brown states,

> Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It’s about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen. (p. 49)

She acknowledges that this is not always an easy choice, saying, “Authenticity isn’t always the safe option,” as it means being uncomfortable and risking “being real over being liked” (p. 52). However, she shares that

> There’s even more risk in hiding yourself and your gifts from the world. Our unexpressed ideas, opinions, and contributions don’t just go away. They are likely to fester and eat away at our worthiness. I think we should be born with a warning label similar to the ones that come on cigarette packages: Caution: If you trade in your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief. (p. 53)

Cashman (2008) supports this diagnosis, citing John Gardener who said that, “Human beings have always employed an enormous variety of clever devices for running away from themselves” (p. 36). Therefore, Brown states, “in the end, being true to ourselves is the best gift we can give the people we love” (p. 53). Bill Plotkin (2013) discusses how deeply we each long to find our own unique calling and expression in the world, and how the world also needs that from us:

> If your soul is your ultimate place in the world and you need to live from that place to be fully yourself, then the world cannot be fully *itself* until you become fully *yourself*. Your soul is part of the soul of the world. . . . The world needs us to recognize its sacredness and inhabit our sacred roles in its evolutionary unfolding. (p. 188)
Susan, who had returned home to live with her parents after two years of graduate school, was wrestling with the expectations of her family and society of who she should be versus her desire to find her own path. She described her experience in EOL as incubating her “sense of self”:

It was sort of like this community or circle where I was bringing this new identity and I wasn’t trying to hide who I was. And in fact I was encouraged to just show up as you are and bring your whole authentic self—whatever state you’re in—into the circle. . . . And feel loved and supported for who I was/am.

Kyle also spoke about how EOL supported him in coming to know his own true nature:

Authenticity . . . it’s almost like someone is showing you the ephemeral state of your future self in that word and you have to bring that word within you and let it grow. That’s what I feel like . . . I just can’t kid myself. Even when I try, there’s this wave of nature support that says, this is not who you are.

Kyle makes an important point—if we are not being authentic, we receive feedback from the natural world and our surroundings that reflects this back to us. As Brown described in her human “warning label,” if we are inauthentic, this will manifest by feeling disconnected from others and ourselves. In contrast, Donna talked about how the more she is authentic and vulnerable, the more she experiences connection:

What I found more and more was the more authentic I am, the more people are drawn to that. . . . When I have the courage to allow myself to be vulnerable and authentic, it gives other people permission and it connects people, because what you’re doing is tapping into something that is essentially human, that we all share. And you’re simply saying, look at this; we all have this in common somehow.

Part of the reason that authenticity and vulnerability are so powerful—the reason why Brown’s popular TED talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” went viral, with more than 10 million hits—is because, as Donna says, this is something that we all have in common.

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8 [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)
When we experience someone as authentic, we naturally feel close to them and want to connect with them.

By having a practice ground within EOL to try out being one’s authentic self in a safe setting, participants gained the strength and conviction to practice this outside the village. Donna talked about how this led to her finding her authentic voice and leadership style in her role as an Executive Director of an organization. Kyle also felt inspired to integrate this newly acquired knowledge into his life beyond EOL:

I really feel like it’s that cultivation of talking about what that means to us in EOL and then going out and being with our ecology, our communities, and seeing how that new understanding of authenticity relates to our lives. And how to really look within and see what have I been doing that is more influenced from external things aren’t really true to me? That was huge and is still huge.

The discussion of how participants come to express their authenticity in the world will come center stage in “Into the Canopy,” where we will see how participants begin to make the changes they want to see outwardly in their lives.

Authenticity and vulnerability go hand in hand. By trusting the circle as a safe place to share their most tender selves with one another, participants found that they were also able to be more authentic. After her experience with sharing about her body image issues, Donna said, “What I know is, after that experience, I was able to be much more authentic. Maybe it’s being able to have the courage to express who I am more clearly in the world and be less concerned about judgment from others and myself.” She described authenticity as “the crux of it all for me,” and said that being authentic for her was really about self-love. By being seen and accepted by others in her vulnerability, she came to love herself more and was able to also be more authentic.

Tim spoke about the relationship between authenticity, vulnerability, and shame:
If I really want to change my relationship with shame and how I think about myself, I have to be willing to let folks get close to it and I’ve got to be able to get close to it. So for me, this sort of vulnerability was being open to being open, really. To how can I allow myself to be seen and held and loved? . . . For me, it became a really important part of that healing journey. I needed to be able to be who I was, not the story of who I think I am or the story that I tell. I can’t heal a fiction. I can’t heal an illusion that I create. Healing starts with what is actually real. So for me, vulnerability was about: be real with yourself, because that is what you are. And give it a shot of letting folks see you and who you are. And then what do you know; people love you anyway.

Tim raises an important point—we can only heal and move forward by being real, not by basing our lives on a fiction, or a constructed identity.

This definition of authenticity does not mean that EOL advocates a sense of self as a fixed, unchangeable identity. Like the acorn, each individual carries within them a certain potential of their actualization or “future tree,” but what one becomes is influenced and changes depending on the experiences one has and the context and environment in which one develops. Human DNA is an excellent example of this—we each carry a certain blueprint for our development, but which genes are expressed is highly influenced by our environment. This applies to the human experience on both a biological level as well as emotionally, mentally, and spiritually—who we are is constantly evolving and changing, and very much influenced by our own process as well as our relationships with the world around us. There may be aspects of the self that feel consistent and essential, which stay true or even become more prominent or clarified throughout one’s life; while other aspects may shift and transform radically. Within this changing reality, authenticity means tapping into a deep sense of what is true and real for the individual in that precise moment in time.
Vulnerability

My first EOL weekend as a participant, I had the opportunity to practice being vulnerable in the village. I don’t remember the content, or the exercise, that triggered my emotional response. All I remember is that I was sitting in the circle, in the yurt, in a spot that was right by the door. As I felt my tears coming, I had the impulse to leave immediately—to isolate myself, to find a tree to sit under where I could safely cry, just me and the landscape. This pattern was an old one for me—going all the way back to being 12 years old, when my mother was on her deathbed with breast cancer, and I realized that I was about to lose her. I remember running from her bedroom where she lay, through the hallway, into my own room, and crying hot tears there by myself. After her death, I did not cry again for many years, except on very rare occasions, when I would seek a place of solitude where I felt safe to emote.

For me to be publicly vulnerable was therefore not comfortable. But as I sat there that day, I had already seen others in the group, such as Tim, courageously bring their vulnerability to the circle, and had seen how it had supported them in moving through what they were experiencing. I therefore made a choice—to fight the strong urge to bolt, and instead to raise my hand and be open and vulnerable with the group about what was going on in my life. It was a significant turning point for me, and as I talked, I felt the power of collective healing and witnessing—and the possibility that I could be held and supported exactly where I was.

Brown (2013) defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure,” and says that it’s “about showing up and being seen.” Brown (2007) talks about the challenge of being vulnerable in a culture in which success and leadership are
equated with being strong, saying, “We equate vulnerability with weakness, and, in our culture, there are very few things we abhor more than weakness” (p. 77). However, this inability to be seen is what prevents true connection; Brown describes her own experience with this, and how her research led her into a profound realization:

My inability to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability limited the fullness of those important experiences that are wrought with uncertainty: Love, belonging, trust, joy, and creativity to name a few. (p. 77)

In contrast, when we feel afraid and decide to go ahead and be vulnerable, it creates one of the deepest bases for connection possible in the human experience, as we are fully open in that moment. It is also a powerful antidote to shame. As Brown (2010) says, when we decide to share with vulnerability, “shame and fear can’t tolerate that kind of powerful connection surging between people” (p. 11). She talks about an instance in her own life of sharing something vulnerable, and the resulting feeling: “I felt totally exposed and completely loved and accepted at the same time” (p. 11). In my experience, learning to be vulnerable and to be seen and loved in that place is one of the secret healing keys of EOL.

The healing power of vulnerability was evidenced repeatedly in my research findings, as individuals spoke about their experiences of opening up to the group. As stated by Susan, “When we come together and create that space and people are able to be that vulnerable and open… it’s what EOL is all about.” Part of the medicine for overcoming shame is about allowing us to be seen not only in our “light” or our positive qualities, but also in our “shadow” or negative qualities. Laura spoke about how witnessing another participant bring these aspects and still be received helped her to also feel safe to bring her whole self forward:
Witnessing someone being ugly, like showing their shadow and their shit and still being totally received and held . . . that was huge for me . . . And I knew that was something that was going to need to happen for me—allowing myself to be seen in my gift, but also being seen as an asshole. . . . Not that that’s my goal, but to allow fullness and to trust that I can be held . . . that was very potent for me to allow the shadow to come into the room and for it to be really held.

Carl also talked about how seeing others bring forward their challenges gave him permission to be vulnerable, saying,

It’s only possible through being in a safe environment where you feel really secure and helped and loved and once those ingredients get mixed together then it’s right for everyone to be vulnerable. Then you see the person next to you being vulnerable and its like, “Wow, it is okay. I thought I was messed up,” you know.

Being vulnerable to the group was not an easy thing for many participants. Jeff Z. talked about how this was challenging for him throughout the program:

It has been a struggle . . . probably, part of that goes back to that early experience. Here’s my heart right here and having it kicked time and time again . . . I don’t really want to go through that again. That was pretty hard when I was 8. I’m obviously not 8 anymore.

Nalini also talked about how vulnerability was a foreign concept to her prior to joining EOL, due to the family she grew up in:

I remember that whenever my mom would see me cry, it would be this big argument and emotional beating of, “It’s not going to stop anything. Why are you doing this?” . . . So for me vulnerability has always been hard. . . . Ironically, I don’t think when other people show emotion it’s weak… And in the group it’s interesting for me to see the way I hold people who are being vulnerable, because that has helped me allow myself to be vulnerable.

Brown talks about how we hold ourselves to a different standard, as Nalini indicated—we frequently expect others to be vulnerable, but we don’t want to be vulnerable ourselves. However, being in a circle where vulnerability is regularly practiced begins to give us permission to also bring forward and accept our own vulnerability.
Before EOL, Ericka felt that she needed to be strong and independent. Because of this, she didn’t believe she could have children. This all shifted for her through her experience in the village. When asked what was most transformative for her about EOL, she shared,

I embraced vulnerability because of the shift and perspective of EOL. I probably would not even have had kids before that, because I had to be strong. . . . It’s like before I used to be like, “No I cannot be dependent on a man.” And therefore, how can I have kids?! Because the most vulnerable moment of your life is when you give birth. . . . Then how do you take care of your kid?

Ericka’s openness came by witnessing others in the group in their vulnerability, particularly women, including one who was in the EOL circle with her 18 year-old son. Seeing a successful businesswoman who could also cry and be emotional about her love for her son modeled for Ericka what was possible. Ericka also felt that the connection with nature and the realization that animals are also vulnerable helped her, saying:

I think really the connection with nature and seeing myself as a female, like other animals, (helped me with) being okay with being vulnerable. . . . Then I started to envision a son or daughter.

By the end of that EOL circle, Ericka was pregnant.

There were many stories of how these kinds of significant shifts happened for people through stepping into their vulnerability. Susan talked about how it helped her to get over her shyness, and feeling that “it was too much to share my voice with the circle.” Instead of holding back, she brought that fear forward and exposed it:

There was something about being able to share my fear . . . of unraveling where that came from. . . . I was crying in front of the group. And it was really scary but really powerful and liberating at the same time. So maybe that was the beginning of “it’s okay for me to share my experience” and “it’s okay for me to share where I’m coming from and my point of view” with the community.

Donna worked through a major nugget about her body image in the circle:
I went ahead and brought that up in group and the healing that happened for me there, I think, was what really allowed me to go to the next level. I didn’t realize . . . that was still a big deposit in my soil . . . I think it was the setting and everything about EOL that allowed that to occur, because I felt so safe and so held that I was able to really just allow all that to come up. I mean you have 20 people holding empathetic space for you. It’s really different energetically and much more powerful than just one really amazing person holding a space for you. So all that reflection, surrounded by all that love, and . . . letting myself be vulnerable to just express all that was off the charts.

Carl gave a beautiful description of what was transformative for him about being in the EOL village:

The emotion and tears, and of course laughter, but just the vulnerability and the modeling of that vulnerability . . . the beauty of witnessing a group of strangers—seemingly strangers—coming together in such a short period of time, being so willing and courageous to share things that, in some cases they may not have shared in their entire life. And to have that feel safe is pretty special. It’s miraculous in some ways.

The more time I spend in the EOL village, the more I believe that vulnerability is one of the keys to experiencing deep, meaningful connections and also to becoming an embodied leader. Since that first day that I spoke up in the yurt, I have had many opportunities to practice being vulnerable, including while in the midst of facilitating a circle, and each time, it deepens the container and creates more trust and connection. As Brown (2010) says, “Leaning into the discomfort of vulnerability teaches us how to live with joy, gratitude, and grace” (p. 73). In the next section, we will look at the connection between vulnerability and being our authentic selves.

**Healing with Planetary Roots**

From the perspective that we are nature and that healing is a collective endeavor, going “into the roots” means not only our personal root systems but also going into the
roots of the entire planet. This includes recognizing and confronting the system-wide nuggets and traumas that may be informing our experience. For example, what is the impact on the individual of major experiences in the collective history of the world, such as colonization, slavery, the witch trials, and other acts of genocide and war? What is the impact of our collective disconnection from the natural world through the agricultural revolution, industrialization, and capitalism? Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (2013) says in relation to the global crisis that

Before we can begin to redeem this crisis, we need to go to the root of our present paradigm—our sense of separation from our environment, the lack of awareness that we are all a part of one interdependent living organism that is our planet. (p. 246)

Recognizing we are part of a collective root system also means having the potential to receive nourishment and healing from what is healthy in the collective soil. All this is a part of and essential to an ecological view of the individual’s healing journey. Ingerman (2013) speaks to the importance of remembering this saying,

At the same time we must remember that in oneness we are connected to all life on this earth, joined together in a web of life. This means we must live from a place of honor and respect. We are part of nature, not separate from it. . . . Realizing this, we will never pollute that which gives us life. (p. 209)

With this consciousness, we can move toward both our own healing and the healing and preservation of the planet. As cited by Macy (2013), John Seed says:

May we turn inwards and stumble upon our true roots in the intertwining biology of this exquisite planet. May nourishment and power pulse through these roots, and fierce determination to continue the billion-year dance. (p. 145)
Moving into the Canopy

By learning to trust the village, opening into a process of collective healing, and practicing our vulnerability and authenticity, we create an ecology in which healing can naturally occur. Through this process, it becomes possible to move into a place of creativity and readiness for action. In the next part, we will move out of the roots and soil, and “Into the Canopy,” to see how the EOL journey supports individuals to create outward transformation.
PART FOUR: INTO THE CANOPY
CHAPTER ELEVEN: DESIGNING YOUR LIFE—CREATING WITH SELF

In Part Four, we travel up into the canopy to see how participants in the Ecology of Leadership create external change in their own lives and in the world. Chapter Twelve will look specifically at how participants utilize personal practices such as the life wheel, the creative scene, making commitments, and the regenerative leadership pattern. Subsequent chapters will look at how connection with nature and connection with the village further support outward creation and manifestation in the canopy, and the resulting fruits of these endeavors.

Designing your Life

Generating change in the canopy in the context of EOL is based on the principle that as individuals, we can intentionally design our lives and engage supportive practices such as visioning, committed action, and collaboration with nature. Participants spoke about how it was transformative to realize that they were not victims of external circumstances, and could actively design and co-create their lives. Carle, who was feeling stuck in several areas before joining the program, said, “I think EOL really allowed me to notice that I was in the driver’s seat a little bit and to really want to take my life by the horns and just be an active participant in my own life.” Regina spoke of a similar feeling of empowerment:

Such a foundation was laid for me in EOL that was so powerful around claiming my power and stepping into what I really want to do with myself in the world. And it was a time of really claiming that and believing that I could manifest the future that I want to and that it wasn’t just something I was endlessly searching for that I wasn’t finding. . . . Yea, I think that I was really empowered to just start claiming who I am and what I want to do and doing that with people and being witnessed and all a sudden those things start blossoming in my life and they have been since, I would say, day one, week one of Ecology of Leadership.
Participants are supported with a series of tools to help them connect to their visions and work toward creating the life they want to live. The first of these is the life wheel.

**Life Wheel**

The life wheel is similar in concept to the landscape assessment of one’s roots and soil, as applied to the canopy. Participants are asked to identify the most important aspects of their life, for example: family, intimate relationship, community, work/service path, health, spiritual practice, recreation, and home. There are an infinite number of categories that could be identified, but for the sake of feasibility and simplicity, participants are asked to choose eight that they want to focus on. Tim talked about how he was able to identify these fairly quickly:

*The experience of really getting clear on what was most important to your life. It was actually a pretty easy exercise. Usually in a couple minutes you can say wow, if I was to pick the six or eight things in my life that I really care about, they actually come pretty easy.*

The simplest way to draw the life wheel is as a circle sectioned into eight parts; however, participants have the opportunity to engage their creativity to personalize their wheels. When I first completed mine, I drew it in the design of a flower,
with the leaves representing my spiritual, physical, emotional and mental well-being (drawing upon the framework of the medicine wheel), and the petals representing the four primary areas of relationship in my life: friendship, family, community, and intimate partnership (See Figure 11.2). Ericka adapted her life wheel based upon her hands:

My life wheel I modified based on an ah-ha moment… I was at one of my sit spots and then I looked at my hands. (I realized) I can only handle as much as I can really handle—with my hands. So I start to do my life wheel based on my hands. My left side is more emotional—the personal side. And the right side is what I do out there professionally.

Ericka talked about the value of the life wheel, saying, “The life wheel was fantastic. I even use it nowadays where I work with the development of grassroots leaders at our leadership academy every year.” She creates a new one each year, and reviews it each quarter to make sure it reflects her current priorities. She also uses it as a project management tool—if she wants to add a new project, she has to let one of the existing ones go. She said, “We tend as social change agents to think that everything is important. And everything is important, but I am only one person with ten fingers…Basically I have more balance now—I exercise my self-awareness more.”

When asked which practices she is still utilizing post-EOL, Carol said,

Life wheel, definitely. That’s probably one of the strongest ones . . . it’s been a useful tool to kind of just do a baseline check-in, you know, these 6–8 parts of my life, however I want to divide it, how am I really feeling about them right now? And if I’m not happy—I mean, it was part of leaving Google last summer—I got
to the point where I was like, “Okay, I’m not eating well, I’m not sleeping well, I don’t feel well in my body, I’m not exercising, and on an emotional level I’m really bored and unchallenged.” So that kind of malaise is seeping through my entire life, like I don’t want to do anything. You kind of look at the grass around the wheel and like, this is unacceptable. Something has to change.

As Carol points out, the life wheel can be a way to assess one’s canopy to determine what areas might be ready for a change or in need of some attention.

Participants are also encouraged to use the life wheel as a means to assess their time and energy allocation. For each segment, participants can assess how much time or energy they are putting in, and then assess how actualized they feel in that area. Nalini spoke about how she was able to identify a clear link between the areas that she was putting energy into and what was going well, versus those she was neglecting:

One of the things for me that was really informative was when we did the life wheel and we talked about “okay, let’s section it off and put down eight things that are important in life. Health, work, service and family.” And just looking at what I had realized and then the amount of energy that I had put into each one. And I thought, “Oh my god. My life is exactly where it should be based on the energy that I’m putting in to the different pieces of pie.” And I know that’s not rocket science. It makes sense that if you put effort into something, you’re going to achieve results, but I guess, it’s not always obvious the lack of, right? It’s not the choice other people are making around me; it’s all of the choices I have been making and allowed to happen over time.

This realization helped Nalini step out of a victim mentality and understand that she had agency and responsibility in creating her life, as there was a direct link between the areas she was putting energy into and those she felt were going well. Others, for example Carol in her work at Google, noted putting significant time and energy into an aspect of their wheel, such as their work or a particular relationship, but feeling unfulfilled in this area. This is referred to in EOL as an “energy leak.” Lauren said,

The energy leaking, that’s a really important component. That’s like, ‘Wow, I’m spending way too much time trying to find x . . . so my house needs to have a little more structure. Or, wow, I’m really losing a lot of energy over this
relationship. It’s creating negativity in my life, I don’t need that anymore, you know.

As Lauren and Carol both suggest, an energy leak indicates that there is an opportunity to reexamine this area of one’s life.

The life wheel is thus a tool to support participants in defining the primary areas of focus in their lives and to assess how things are going with regard to each. It forms the basic blueprint for the branches of the canopy that participants then work with throughout the program. In the next section, I discuss the core technology used in EOL for visioning and co-creating one’s life, the creative scene.

The Creative Scene

Visioning Sourced from the Heart and Spirit

For each area of the life wheel, participants are invited to engage in a visioning process called developing a “creative scene.” The concept of the creative scene originates from the master’s program in Spiritual Psychology that James Stark completed at the University of Santa Monica. It is known there as the “ideal scene” and was modified for EOL. Whereas the “ideal” scene could be construed as more of an intellectual or perfectionist construct of how something “should” be, the creative scene is framed as a vision sourced from the heart. This process requires deep listening within oneself as well as listening to the creative impulse of what is being manifested through us. From an Indigenous perspective, this could be thought of as listening for our “Original Instructions” (Nelson, 2008). For example, if an acorn could visualize its potential, it would see its fullest expression as a healthy, mature tree. So rather than participants attaching themselves to visions based on societal expectations or norms—e.g. the big
house, a family with 2.5 kids, financial security, etc.—they are encouraged to source their visions through a much deeper connection to their purpose, their nature, or from a spiritual perspective, what Spirit/God/Creation/the Universe has intended for them.

Kyle described this process of connecting with his creative scenes as follows:

To me, it’s a process of going within and contacting that inner being, that eternal unity . . . that everything has within it that supports and manifests this world . . . just tapping into whatever is there, because it’s your nature. To me, it’s the divine expressing itself through your physiology, so it has a particular flavor. There’s things that just come up. “Yup, that’s what I want to do. Yup, this is true.” To me, it’s . . . a very clear and easy way to know yourself and what you want. What you really most deeply want.

Deborah referred to the metaphor of the acorn, in talking about where she was sourcing her visions:

So what’s the little acorn that your decision to do something is stemming from? . . . You know, it’s just a true, inspired, creative, centered place that you are moving towards that thing, and then it becomes less like an extra limb that you’re trying to grow or maintain, and more of, what you’re really here on this Earth to do.

The creative scenes are modeled with a heart at the center to remind participants of this inner source that is at the core of their visions.
The Creative Scene Practice

Once the individual has connected to the essence of what they want to experience or manifest in a particular area of their life, the next step is to create a representation of this vision. Participants are asked to brainstorm a series of one sentence statements that together make up an image of how they want that area of their life to look and feel. For example, in the creative scene for family that I made in EOL-8 (See Figure 11.6), some of the statements include: “We play together,” “We go for daily walks in nature,” “We live in community,” “We practice gratitude together,” and “We have fun.” The point is not to be attached to these particular statements being actualized—but rather to generate a picture or “scene” that represents the essence of the vision in one’s heart.

Two years after I made that scene, my family does not go for daily walks together in nature—but we do live in a beautiful regional park where the children play outside daily, and we go for hikes together every few weeks. What’s important is that the essence of this statement—that nature connection be a central part of the family life—is happening. In addition, participants are asked to imbue the scene with one word qualities that further flush it out—for example, some of mine for family included “Loving,” “Peaceful,” “Grateful,”

Practice: Creative Scene

Identify an area of your life for which you would like to create a new vision. Examples could include a relationship, your physical health, your home, your spiritual practice, or a job.

Take a few moments to connect to the highest potential of what you sense is possible in that area of your life. What would really light you up? What does it look like? Feel like? Smell like?

Document this with one sentence statements in the present tense and one word qualities—or write a story, song, or draw a picture exemplifying the essence of this vision. Share it with someone!
“Connected,” and “Joyful.” The creative scene is presented in EOL by putting these statements and words together in a radiated visual representation as seen in Figure 12.6. However, participants are free to adapt the process as they like for their personal use. For example, they can write the sentences and qualities out in list, create a story, make a drawing or painting, or even choose a song that helps represent the essence of the vision of the creative scene. Figure 11.7 shows one participant’s creative scenes as a collage combining words with images. Jeff Z. spoke about how he made his creative scenes into stories. He said,

I just decided that I needed to write stories for them. So I had this whole brainstorming process where I would throw out words and then I would throw out the affirmative statements. I remember for home it was I’m a good steward of my land, my barn hosts community events. My family always feels welcome. A couple of acres out back and some crop rows and a stream, and we’re trying to get salmon in there. Park the bikes out front, and I kick my shoes off at the front porch. . . . A moment from the experience of living in this home. . . . And then I moved on to . . . do the story.

Breaking out of the prescribed form helped Jeff to connect more clearly to his vision.
Creative scenes are initially constructed for the eight areas of the life wheel, however, participants learn that they can apply this technology to any aspect of their lives. For example, if I am going to have an important conversation with someone, I will often make a creative scene beforehand to get clear about how I want the conversation to proceed and outline my vision for what I sense could be the highest potential outcome. I do the same for my relationships, a practice I began with my first buddy in EOL.

**Leaning into Possibility**

One of the primary shifts that participants report experiencing through their creative scenes is tapping into a new sense of possibility. Ericka spoke about this creating more freedom and enjoyment in how she approaches her life:

> You see that it’s possible to do things, and they come naturally. You know, intention, the power of intention. If you put your dreams into your creative scenes, they will manifest over time. And you will have fun along the way. You will enjoy life more on your way to manifest your scenes. It’s not like, “I have a goal and I have to reach it.” That’s how I used to see life.

Jeff Z. talked about creative scenes being a way to visualize your life as “firing on all cylinders”:

> It’s really an amazing process to really sit with a blank slate and ask yourself the question, what would it look like? What would it look like to max out your love relationship? You’re just firing on all cylinders.

Tim also spoke about how he used creative scenes to imagine each of the areas of his life wheel as fully optimized:

> And then, moving from, well these are things I care about to what would it look like for this to be a homerun? What would it look like to have a career that lit me up and had me employing my power and doing work that inspired me? What would it look like to have a really powerful relationship with my parents and my partner? . . . And don’t just say, I want to improve my relationship with my family. What do you want it to look like? What do you want it to feel like? What
do you want it to smell like? And don’t say it as some future; say it as now. Claim it. Claim what you want. That to me, is a mentality shift of the power of intention and the power of demanding from the universe what you want. Making it so, by saying it so. That’s a really new and powerful way for me to think about creating the life I want. It’s moving from a passive voice to the active voice. To me, that’s what that’s really all about.

Tim points out an important distinction—the creative scene is written in the present voice. By expressing the vision as if it is already happening it becomes a creative act of affirmation. Jeff Z. also emphasized how writing the story for home in present tense helped him to imagine a path toward achieving his vision:

The act of writing down those statements, and envisioning in the present tense, in a positive voice . . . it’s just an incredibly powerful tool. If you really believe it. I really believed it. It was simple for me to see and it drew the whole thing so much closer, right? Instead of being this abstract vision. Well someday I’ll have a house, I’ll have some land that I’m responsible of taking care of. And critters who inhabit it. And a dog, whatever. A barn, that’d be cool. Just to put it in the present tense, just drew it in and made it seem like, oh, that’s not so far off. It’s something I could achieve. There’s many things that need to happen to bring that vision to fruition, but it’s easier to put the pieces together at that point and say, oh I see a path—how that could happen?

By believing in his creative scene, Jeff felt it became a realistic goal. Not long after we had this interview, his partner became a participant in EOL, and they moved in together. Her project was to make their new house a home—they therefore had the opportunity to engage the EOL tools to collectively work towards a creative scene for that home.

Moving beyond the box of what we expect will happen and opening up to new possibilities is core to the creative scene process. This mental shift may be even more important than the actual results of a particular scene. It requires a change in how we are approaching our lives. As described by Jeff Z., “The feeling of doing a creative scene to me is it’s primary output, as opposed to the paper or the collage or the story or whatever.” James and Carl also discussed this during our interview:
What happens out of a creative scene isn’t the important thing, it’s the opening of us to possibility. . . . We’re open to something more than we were open to before. And it just starts to work from there.—James

Well I think that’s what I was talking about in terms of when I said my heart opening, that’s how I visualize it, just the heart opening and then it’s really easy for me to get into this flow and that’s when things that were impossible become possible.—Carl

Opening the door for miracles. Because we’re okay with miracles happening. We can surrender. Miracle ecology.—James

Indeed, many participants experienced what they would describe as miracles through their use of the creative scene. In the next section, I discuss examples of how the creative scene process was truly transformative for many participants.

**The Transformative Power of the Creative Scene**

Of all of the practices introduced in the Ecology of Leadership, the creative scene may be the single most transformative means for creating radical changes in the canopy. Some of these have already been described throughout the dissertation—for example, the stories of Elyse and Ericka, who both became pregnant during EOL. Lauren used it to envision herself becoming a serious athlete:

I had a whole creative scene around riding three or more 200 mile bike rides in one cycling season and it was really hard and it was really scary and it took exuberance and courage . . . there’s a lot in my past around being kind of like the chubby ballerina, but not the athlete. And the one who can be a really nice girl, but can she kickass and really hammer something out, and is it okay to be tough, and can I be soft and strong at the same time? And my bike has really helped me experiment and explore that world, and still does.

Regina spoke about how many changes have happened through her creative scenes:

I can remember really clearly writing down that I want to be a healer and I want to be a mentor and I want to connect people to nature and empower women and men so that they’re in strong co-creative relationships rather than co-dependent relationships. This was just one creative scene. . . . I’ve just seen all those things
that I wrote down on that little piece of paper starting to come true. It’s like wow, I’m mentoring people all the time, and I’m working with women intimately. . . . I’ve been amazed at how everything coming in has been an answer of prayer.

Just yesterday or last week was one around dance. I had a whole creative scene around dance and just found an amazing mentor that wants to work one on one on doing dance healing. . . . It’s like, wow, there’s that one blossoming too. It’s amazing. . . .

All of these things that I’ve envisioned have slowly trickled into my life in where life feels so abundant and rich in these dreams I’ve put on paper. I think it hasn’t been that slowly, but it has. It’s been a couple of years. My parents are participating in my life and understanding me in a way that I never thought they would. . . . (It was a creative scene for me to have) my family connected and understanding me.

Regina went from not knowing what she wanted to do upon entering EOL to connecting to her visions of being a healer, a mentor, a dancer, and of working with women and men around issues of intimacy, all of which she is now doing. She is also experiencing more connection in her relationship with her family due to her creative scenes process.

Tim also wanted to experience a change in his family relationships. He said,

Yea, my family (creative scene) is the most sudden and miraculous. My family has been mostly separated for the last 25 years. We’ve barely spent any time together as a family unit. A lot of long periods of not talking between family members, son-mother, mother-father, father-son. Just a lot of unhealthy, dysfunctional-ness in the family, which for me is very difficult, because a lot of my grief comes from pain from a family that has struggled in a number of ways.

When Tim and I were program participants (EOL-8), he made a creative scene for family, and I remember that it felt so unrealistic to him that he angrily threw the paper across the room. I asked him about this in our interview, and he said that his feeling at the time was, “Yea, this is absurd. This is ridiculous. I’m saying things that can’t happen. I’m claiming the impossible.” However, the magic of the creative scene process is that by putting out a new vision, we expand and shift what is possible. Tim continued,
But I set the intentions and I set it in a powerful way, and within a year, it was just happening. Less than one year from the day of setting the intention of all of us being in the room together . . . We did a Christmas together for the first time in 30 years. All of the family, plus my sister’s new daughter . . . were all together and did Christmas day together. Is the family fixed? No, but change that did not happen in a long, long time started happening and it just doesn’t feel like a coincidence for me. It feels way too powerful for that to just be a coincidence.

As a participant in EOL-8, the first scene I made was for a challenging conversation that I was scheduled to have after the weekend. From my previous interactions with the individual, I expected the conversation to be extremely difficult and painful. Like Tim, it seemed impossible to me that the relationship could ever change. However, I used the creative scene to consider a different possibility—a conversation imbued with love, understanding, and a positive outcome. Casting aside my doubt, I decided to trust the process and shared my scene with the circle. With the support of the village (a point I will come back to in Chapter Thirteen), and to my amazement, the conversation unfolded in a manner consistent with my creative scene.

Since that first creative scene that I made in February 2011, I have had many powerful experiences with the process. One such example is the creative scene I had for my home. I was travelling to the Regenerative Design Institute one day on the beautiful Sir Francis Drake highway. As I drove through the Redwood groves lining the road entering Samuel P. Taylor Park, I felt called to stop by the creek that accompanies the bends, which I now know as Lagunitas. Parking along the roadside, I wandered toward the water, found a sun-dappled rock creek side, and paused for a while. As I settled into the spot with the sounds of moving water, the light coming through the trees, and the sparkling of the creeks’ surface, I felt myself at home, at peace, and in deep connection with that landscape and all of Creation. Suddenly, the essence of a vision came fast and
clear—THIS was my creative scene for “home.” I wanted this level of deep nature connection to be available to me every day, right in my own backyard. I wanted my children to grow up with this as their environment. Without having to even write it down, the scene played itself out clearly in my mind, sourced directly from the heart and from that connection I was experiencing in the moment. It felt like a clear “YES.”

That night I returned to the transitional home I was living in—the fifth I had been in since moving to California one-year prior. On a whim, I opened Craigslist, checked the listings and there it was, second from the top—“HOME IN TILDEN PARK.” I wrote the landlord, who agreed to meet the next morning. There were four other applicants coming to look at the same time, who had all replied before me. But I knew that it was mine—the creative scene was that clear. By noon the deal was done, and here I sit a year later.

My children love to go into the yard and find the “roly-poly’s,” to say “ew!” when they see a slimy banana slug, to suck the juice from the honeysuckle, to crumble the rosemary in their fingers and smell its sweet fragrance, to collect apples from the tree and make applesauce with their friends, to splash wildly in the outdoor bathtub under the redwoods, to wander straight from our backyard into the park for endless hikes and adventures, to watch the stars and occasional meteor shower at night. Coming home the other day, my eldest, Jalen remarked—“Mom—it’s the first deer of the season!” We are home.
This is the miraculous power of the creative scene. As Tim went on to say, “Who wants to claim the possible? . . . That’s a boring way to live. You might as well claim the impossible. It’s your life. The clock is running. Claim the impossible.”

**Ongoing Application of the Creative Scenes**

I continue to use creative scenes regularly, in my relationships with others, and for each major project I do or goal that I have. It is a simple and yet transformative tool that many of the participants mentioned they utilize as a central practice in their lives today. Michelle and Lauren both commented that if they feel something is not going well, they make a creative scene. Lauren said, “If things aren’t working out for me in one area of my life, I know that it’s time to do a creative scene around it.” Michelle’s comment was very similar: “When any area of my life, whether it’s very public, like say workshop leading, counseling, coaching or some other community project stuff that I do, when it’s not going very well, I immediately bring (creative) scenes in.”

Carl spoke about how he keeps the essence of the creative scene practice alive:

It’s not always on paper but I think it’s with me almost every day in terms of how I go about making things happen that I want to make happen. And how I am able to support other people in that. Because I could be with somebody who only sees the things that can’t happen and really helping them to remind them there are a lot of things that are unknown and a lot of things outside of our control. So if we could just paint a picture.

This serves Carl well in his work with Transition US, where he helps local citizens who have deep concerns about climate change to connect to a vision of possibility for hope and inspired action toward a more sustainable future.

Carle talked about how creative scenes help in her decision-making:

I feel paralyzed when I’m in a decision and I feel like creative scenes are a great way to dispel that paralysis. It helps me get to the core of what I’m wanting to
manifest. . . Hard to actually sit down and actually do it, but once I did, I’m like oh yea. And also, I’m just a visual person, an artist so I really enjoyed making it into something I wanted to look at regularly.

Regina also spoke about how creative scenes support her in making key life choices:

Creative scene work I do all the time . . . if there’s something that’s going on and I’m confused about it, like a new job or starting a year of school, I’m like, oh how do I want it to look? I just write a creative scene about it. I do that a lot and recommend it a lot. Design it. I say that a lot too. You can design it. And it’s so liberating.

I love how Regina frames this: “You can design it.” This points back to the beginning of this chapter, and the idea that we are not victims of our lives. We have the capacity to co-create our reality, through collaboration with our own inner purpose and guidance.

**The North Star**

When put together, the creative scenes of the life wheel form a collective vision for the participant’s overall life vision and purpose, or “North Star.” The term North Star is used to indicate a guiding compass point or directional orientation for one’s life. This metaphor is
based on the star itself being a fixed point that does not move in the sky, which as such has been used by many traditional peoples for navigation throughout time.

Some participants put their scenes together in a collective collage at the end of the program to represent this overall vision, as displayed in Figure 11.9. Together, these scenes form a direction towards which to focus one’s life and leadership. This concept of the North Star leads into one of the core content areas of the program: commitment, integrity, and accountability.

**Commitments, Integrity, and Accountability**

EOL introduces a simple five-step process for helping people to make commitments, which includes verifying that the commitment is truly aligned with the North Star vision they have for their life (See Figure 11.10). If one’s current commitments and actions are not in integrity (alignment) with the North Star, then there may need to be some course correcting. The commitments process in EOL thus entails both learning to make clear commitments as well as to renegotiate or release those that are not consistent with one’s life vision.

A key point that came up in the interviews is the difference between setting intentions or making a creative scene and actually following through to

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**Practice – 5 Steps to Making Commitments**

1. **Stop! Pause. Listen. Reflect before speaking.**
2. **Determine how the new commitment aligns with your existing priorities and Creative Scenes/ North Star**
3. **Assess your capacity, ability and willingness.**
4. **Use the language of commitment**
5. **Be in accountability while following through on the**

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*Figure 11.10 – 5 Steps to Making a Commitment*
completion. Carle noted this distinction, saying,

There’s this place in between intentions and commitment that is really important. . . . I feel like I can set intentions all day but . . . I want to be the one in the driver’s seat in my own life. When I want to make something happen, it requires action.

Lauren talked about the power of commitments, saying, “EOL really helps people who’ve been on the fence their whole bloody life to commit to something and to do it and to realize that that can be so freeing.” Tara also spoke about how this content was transformative for her:

You know this commitment piece was huge for me. That was like, “Wow, that’s why I haven’t been committing to anything. The grass is always greener over there, and so I can’t really focus on anything.” So really narrowing it down . . . and how freeing it was when I could see that that was what I needed to be doing, was making a commitment.

The discussion of making commitments and ensuring that they are in integrity is followed with a discussion of how to then be accountable to our commitments. This component will be discussed in Chapter Thirteen, under creating with the village.

**Regenerative Leadership Pattern/Projects**

The final EOL tool or practice for creating in the canopy is called the Regenerative Leadership Pattern (RLP). The RLP, adapted for EOL from Christopher Kuntzsch’s previous consulting work with Steve Dudley Associates, is the core EOL model for practicing regenerative leadership. It asks participants to think beyond a linear structure to consider an ecological framework for action and is presented to support the design and completion of their final project. The projects will be discussed in Chapter Fourteen, however I will provide a brief introduction to the RLP here.
As illustrated in Figure 11.11, the first stage in the RLP, entitled “Awareness and Observation,” is to notice what patterns the individual is seeing and feeling that are leading the participant to take action in a particular direction. For example, my final project as a participant in EOL-8 was to facilitate a women’s leadership retreat. This was inspired by the observations that: 1) Personally, I was feeling ready to step into a leadership role in facilitating transformative workshops, 2) Women who I was interacting with seemed to be craving this kind of training, and 3) Globally, I saw a need to elevate more women leaders, especially through feminine models of leadership. The second stage is to identify the contribution, which I recognized as both to strengthen my own confidence and leadership skills, and to support other women in the development of

Figure 11.11 - The Regenerative Leadership Pattern
theirs. I also saw the global benefit of this project to contribute towards the increase role of women in leadership positions and the balance of the masculine and feminine. The third stage is to articulate the overall objectives for the project—which I identified as facilitating a women’s leadership workshop in my community. Fourth is to determine the actions or steps needed to achieve the objectives—which included designing the workshop, advertising, booking a location, getting materials, and hosting the workshop. A fifth step is to gather insights—to bring one’s curiosity to explore what questions are arising, or need asking. Some of these for me included: What would be the most potent curriculum for a one-day retreat? How do we attract the participants to the workshop? And, what sort of space needs to be created to facilitate the women having a powerful experience? The sixth stage is to identify the community—who is involved, and who am I serving—which was the community of women in my region. Seventh is to identify the stakeholders—allies, mentors, and supporters—my co-facilitator and a group of female friends. And finally, to identify the contribution manifested—how you will know that “success” has been realized—which I described as that the workshop happened and that the women who participated would leave inspired, empowered, and ready to step more confidently into their purpose and lives.

It was interesting to note that the RLP did not come up in the research findings as a significant tool for participants. This may be because I did not include a direct question about it, although I did ask what was most transformative in EOL, and the RLP was not named. I have observed that the RLP is often introduced at a time in the program when participants are overloaded with a number of other significant curricular pieces. This often happens quickly at the end of a weekend, and therefore, as a content-heavy piece, it
may be overwhelming. It could also be that the ecological approach to the project and to leadership is framed more effectively through some of the other EOL practices and experience. Through this research it has been noted that the RLP may need revision, either in the tool itself or in the way it is incorporated pedagogically; however, this requires further examination and study.

In the next two chapters, I discuss how connection with nature and connection with the village supported participants in their creative endeavors.
CHAPTER TWELVE: CREATING WITH NATURE

Just as connection with the natural world supports inner transformation in the roots and soil, I found that nature connection is equally important for creating in the canopy. In this chapter I share my key findings about the role of nature in creative action. This includes collaboration with the natural world, learning to view nature as a mentor or teacher, seeing nature as a metaphor for life and transformation, and using nature as a model for leadership.

Sourcing our Actions from our Bigger Body

In Chapter Nine, I discussed how participants came to understand themselves as part of a “bigger body” through nature connection practice. With this comes the possibility to source one’s actions from a sense of intimate connection and unity with the natural world. Michelle spoke about the feeling of belonging that comes for her through deep nature connection:

When I do sit spot well . . . I re-join my place where I belong. And I can’t access it as effectively with any other core practice that I do. And it’s also a big heart opener for me: I can just drop into delight and gratitude for the world.

Carle described this as more of a spiritual feeling, saying, “So I’ve always felt the closest to God, or to . . . I like to say more like a connection to all things. I always felt the closest to that in nature.” This feeling is supported by Schlitz et al. (2007) in their study of transformation, who state that experiences in nature which inspire awe and wonder are one of the primary ways that people experience consciousness transformation. In fact, the genesis for the Institute of Noetic Sciences came through a profound realization of the astronaut Edgar Mitchell as he was returning from the first successful mission to the
moon, Apollo 14. His view of “Earthrise” gave him a feeling of unity and connection with the earth, and inspired him to found IONS as a place to study noetic experiences (see Figure 12.1). Many of us can relate to a similar feeling of oneness through an intimate experience with nature, such as looking up at the stars from under the night sky. Schlitz et al. (2007) reference Gilbert Walking Bull, a Lakota Elder, who says, “Nature isn’t only an entry point to the sacred, it’s sacred in itself” (p. 58).

**Collaboration with Nature**

With this feeling of oneness with all beings that comes through deep nature connection experiences, we learn that we are not acting as individual agents in the world, but rather as part of a web of relationships and connection. As such, we are both supported by and can collaborate with nature in our actions. Michelle spoke about her experience of this: “And what happens for me in sit spot is that nature shows me, we collaborate, and the more effective our collaboration is depends on how surrendering I can be to just witnessing, observing, noticing.” Nalini talked about how while connecting with nature she experiences a creative surge:

> When you’re in a sit spot, you quiet your mind and allow creativity to come through. It’s just like when you’re in that dream spot right before you wake up and right before you fall asleep. Your mind is totally clear and it allows whatever’s inside you to come out.
I can attest to this, as on a sit spot with Nalini one day, I observed her gently humming melodies the entire practice. The rise in creativity through nature connection is a frequent observation also for students in RDI’s Regenerative Design and Nature Awareness program—one of the primary results that is noted following this nine-month nature connection journey is the increase in musicality amongst the participants.

The concept of collaboration with nature reflects a deep understanding of a relational way of being, or the concept of Mitakuye Oyasin (Lakota for “All my Relations”) that is central to many Indigenous worldviews. This is much more than a nice axiom—it means that we are constantly acting in relationship with the natural world and all life. In the following sections, I discuss ways in which participants experienced this relational way of being and creating through EOL.

**Nature as Mentor/Teacher**

*Receiving Guidance/Inspiration from Nature*

Part of collaboration with nature means looking to the natural world for guidance. Many of the participants noted that nature played a role for them as a mentor or teacher. Tim spoke to this, saying:

> It has a lot of wisdom and can give you a lot of perspective and can really humble the things that you think are so important and the problems that are so insurmountable. Sitting there watching the landscape, going hmm . . . this problem will be gone tomorrow and this landscape will continue to be here. What are all the lessons that are happening right in front my eyes?

Tim reflected on this concept during his final project presentation, saying that through EOL he learned to keep a “bird’s eye” perspective on his life—from which he could watch the daily ups and downs with more detachment and equanimity. Carl also noted
how nature is a teacher for him, as he realized through his sit spot practice, “Wow I really have a lot to learn from the direction of the wind, or the movement of a brush, or that tiny little insect that I don’t know the name of but is beautiful and alive and has a purpose.”

Lauren spoke about turning to nature when she needs help, saying,

If something is feeling stuck, if there’s a problem that needs solving, I do tend to look on the landscape for some solution in nature. So when this happens, how does nature figure it out?

This concept is reflected in the emerging field of “biomimicry,” which is defined as “the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems” (Reading University, 2012). This science, brought to the forefront in the late 1990’s by Janine Benyus, the author of Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature, is applying natural concepts to fields as diverse as agriculture, architecture, climate change solutions, energy efficiency, industrial design, medicine, and transportation (Biomimicry 3.8, n.d.).

I had an experience of receiving guidance from nature during the interview process for this dissertation, which I recounted during my gratitude round with Donna:

I’m grateful this morning for the birds. I’ve been considering the opportunity to go to the bird language program next week at RDI. This morning I got up and I wasn’t feeling good, and I was thinking, I don’t know, maybe I won’t go. And as I was driving down the hill, this crow came all the way down, almost in front of my car. I literally stopped to not hit the crow. I was like, “Whoa, what was that?” And I kept driving, and two seconds later, this stellar jay went “Whoosh,” right over my hood. And I was like, okay, I get it. They’re calling me. They’re going to get in front of my car if I don’t listen. I’m grateful for the opportunity to go to the bird language program and to bring my two little boys. . . . I’m grateful already for the way its going to transform our relationship with the world and myself and the landscape.
The following week, I attended the bird language course, and through that learned even more about how birds can be guides and teachers for us. I am indeed grateful for the crow and the stellar jay that led me to make that choice.

Another concept that arose in the research was learning from nature’s cycles. Ericka said that nature taught her to be patient and to know that its ok for things to take time, saying,

EOL, the practices and the concepts and the nature itself reminds me there is a cycle for everything. You cannot force a seed to plant quickly and therefore some things in life will not happen as soon as you want them too. So I carry with me inside the concept that “it’s okay.” . . . It’s mostly all ok . . . it’s part of life.

Ericka also learned through her nature connection to more deeply appreciate the present:

The observation of nature really made me appreciate the moment. This will not come back, this conversation will not come back and this day will not come back. Tomorrow will be different so enjoy now and the present because tomorrow will be something different.

This observation was connected specifically to an experience that Ericka had watching the birds during her sit spot, as will be shared in the next section.

**Nature as Metaphor**

One of the primary ways in which participants described their learning from the natural world was through the concept of “nature as metaphor.” As stated by Nalini, “Everything you do can be a metaphor about how you’re living your life.” While debriefing their sit spots during the program weekends in Bolinas, participants invariably
talk about what they saw that day in the meadow, and often state that what they saw was
the perfect metaphor or example for something that they needed to know for their healing
and their creative path at that time. Often the same aspect of nature holds different
meanings for each participant. This reflects a teaching I have heard from some of my
Indigenous Elders—that whatever the story may be about, we each always take from it
exactly what we need at the time. The following participant narratives illustrate this
concept.

*Birds’ Wings*

The example of birds’ wings came up for Ericka, Carle, and Jeff M. For Ericka, it
was about learning to slow down and relax:

> Through the eagle or falcon flying over . . . I’m like “Oh my gosh. Sometimes in
life you don’t need to move your wings. You don’t need to be doing-doing-doing
all the time. You can basically glide. I’m always do-do-do and I think that was
definitely my ah-ha moment of like, ‘Oh no, I can glide too’ you know. I don’t
always have to be moving, making an effort all the time to go somewhere. You
can glide, it’s fine.

As Ericka was in a leadership role at a non-profit organization, where she was used to
moving quickly and getting things done, this was a significant lesson.

In contrast, Jeff M. interpreted the birds flapping their wings as an example of
effort and perseverance. He said,

> It’s really great that it’s quiet enough to hear the birds flapping their wings and
getting to be with them in their apparently effortless life. It was interesting to hear
the energy of the wing. It’s not as easy as it looks. Just thinking all the energy that
it gets . . . you know, like mountain biking up, sides of steep hills, all this energy
that goes through it. . . . I was just kind of tracking them, like wow. They’re there
just flapping, flapping, flapping across a long distance. Just somehow hearing it
makes things . . . they’re actually doing a lot. I had no idea they do that.
This metaphor helped Jeff to see that even when it may appear that someone is not putting in a lot of effort, it actually requires a constant “flapping” to move forward in life.

A third meaning was shared by Carle, who referenced another Rumi poem called “Birdwings” (see Figure 12.3). The poem talks about the human tendency to contract and expand, and that this is how we maintain our presence and balance. Carle said:

There’s this other Rumi poem called Birdwings and it’s really beautiful. It’s about the other side. It’s about both sides; you can’t always be open or always be closed, because you’d be paralyzed. It’s all perfectly timed, just like bird wings . . . it’s about letting it all be there, because that’s existence . . . I just think nature is such a beautiful apt metaphor for us, because it actually is us. And I think culturally we have really set ourselves apart from nature; once we remember we’re actually a part of it, it just makes so much more sense. It’s all good. This is natural.

This poem has helped me many times, when I have been in a state of challenge or contraction, to remember that it is part of the natural cycle—whatever opens must close.

**The Caterpillar and the Butterfly**

The model of the caterpillar going into the cocoon and becoming a butterfly is a classic metaphor for the process of transformation. As stated by Schlitz et al. (2007), “even life-affirming transformations aren’t necessarily a walk in the park—let’s not forget, a caterpillar liquefies before it become a butterfly” (p. 29). This image was reassuring to Ericka, who said that when she considered her own process in comparison to “butterflies, how they dissolve themselves—I thought, ‘This is okay.'” Donna also

![Figure 12.3—Birdwings](image-url)
spoke about how the caterpillar’s metamorphosis helped her to trust her own process of transformation:

Christopher offered us this image of the end…of the butterfly. The caterpillar going into its cocoon and turning into mush to allow it to come out different, but there were those cells that held the seeds for the beauty. That image has helped me so many times to realize, you got to totally let go of something so that it has the opportunity to come back different. Otherwise, you got the same ruts. You’re just going to go right back into it. That it’s really healthy to trust that natural process.

As Donna mentions, the form of the butterfly is present within the imaginal cells of the caterpillar but can only emerge through the process of the caterpillar turning into “mush” and reforming itself. This is an excellent reminder when going through an intensive process of transformation—that although it may not feel easy, the only way to truly transform is to fully let go of the old so that we can emerge anew.

**Spider Web**

Spiders are another masterful teacher, and a metaphor that arises frequently in EOL. The sit spot meadow at Commonweal Garden is full of webs, such as the one seen in the picture in Figure 12.5. The spider web was another significant metaphor for Ericka, for whom it symbolized the web of connection that she has with others, even when she
can’t see it. When asked about her most transformative or “a-ha” moments in the program, she said she had a realization about

The connection of the web of life . . . because the spider-web that I don’t see when it’s dark . . . we can compare that with the energetic connection with people that sometimes you don’t see but feel it. Like, “Oh my gosh it seems like I know these people from another life,” or there’s such an intense thing that I don’t know what it is . . . but I can feel or see if I go to the spiritual dimension maybe. So this is one of the a-ha moments too that I remember.

The spider web became symbolic for Ericka, who learned through EOL to trust in the web of connections that she would have the support needed to have a baby. The web is frequently used to represent the village and the threads of connection amongst the community. This was represented visually in a ceremony done for another participant, Alexandra, who was expecting a baby during her participation in EOL-9. The group formed a circle and then tossed a ball of yarn back and forth to one another, tying the rope onto their wrists when it came to them and offering a blessing for her birth that month. At the end of the ceremony, a beautiful web had been woven. Each participant then tied off the yarn around their wrist, and kept it as a bracelet to wear throughout the month until Alexandra had given birth. Thus when Alexandra was in labor, she could look at the bracelet and feel her connection to the whole village.

Figure 12.5—Spider Web in the Meadow (photo by Christopher Kuntzsch)
Nature and Leadership

Several participants found support from the natural world to enhance their leadership and service in the world. Michelle learned to give up control, let go of her ego and trust in nature’s evolution as she relinquished the lead on her EOL project to another participant. She said,

If what I really care about is the vision, then who is doing it is really not important. It’s that it gets well led, whoever that may be. And so truly, I had an ego softening, dissolving experience through my project. It wasn’t really comfy at times, but the lesson was, “Ahhh . . . this is what true nature-sourced transformative leadership is about. You’re bringing things into the world; it really isn’t about me.

Michelle found a way to bring these principles of aligning with nature into her work as a counselor. She said, “I mean, that’s all I’m about: helping people more deeply align with nature in order that their lives be regenerative and become bigger.” She put this into action in part by helping introduce the sit spot and nature connection experiences into her work with urban populations:

I started to build in and with a lot of resistance on the part of my more sub-urban and urban populations, sit spot . . . asking them to do stuff outside with the wild natural world, not just with the vegetables and medicinal plants that I was asking them to bring into their apartments in the city. And wow . . . I didn’t know how many edges there were going to be asking people to spend some time . . . somewhere that’s not cultivated. Asking them to pause their disbelief and give me the benefit of the doubt that there was going to be an impact on their personal body ecology or emotional ecology by doing some wilderness stuff. Anyway, I stuck with it. I’m very persistent. And what happened?

Lauren found a way to bring nature into her work as a consultant and a chaplain. She gave the example of using the principle of nature as metaphor to help create unity amongst Muslim and Zionist patients in a hospital, and between a union steward and a CEO of a corporation:
The most simple way to answer that question is to reference the tree, because if I were working as a hospital chaplain and talking to a Muslim patient and then going back to the nursing station and realizing that some of the reason why this Muslim patient’s needs weren’t being met were because the patient’s nurse was a Zionist and having a lot of his or her own conflict. In that moment, I probably wasn’t going to be actually able to settle the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, but it would be so great to use a word that both would understand and I could talk about an olive tree and they both would get it. And the same thing is true if I’m talking to an employee who’s the union steward and the CEO of that company, each of them is going to have really different points as stakeholders in this engagement and yet they both understand that their great-grandchild would have a really great time if they could swim in a fresh lake, fresh water lake.

So nature’s like the common denominator . . . figuring out how to use regenerative language in a corporate setting was like a cool breeze on a desert day.

Lauren’s approach represents a “coyote” or “trickster” way of introducing nature concepts into more challenging environments, and demonstrates how nature can be a powerful unifier—as she says, a “common denominator.” This was referenced at the 2012 Bioneers conference by a plenary speaker who was working to create an environmental movement in the churches. He said that even in the most conservative churches, no matter where he went, he would begin his talks by asking people to recall one of their early childhood memories of deep nature connection. Without fail, they were able to do this—and this sense of personal connection and relationship to the natural world was what opened the conversation for the church moving into action around climate change.

In summary, connection with the natural world creates a profound sense of belonging and oneness that helps individuals to feel supported in their actions in the world at large. Participants reported learning to view nature as a teacher, a guide, and a mentor. They also learned to see what is happening in the natural world as a metaphor for the lessons they needed for their own personal growth and transformation. Through
referencing the natural world, they strengthened their capacity for leadership and their ability to connect others to nature, either through direct nature connection experiences or through the use of potent metaphors. In the next chapter, I will describe how connecting with the village further supports individuals in their creativity and action.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: CREATING WITH THE VILLAGE

In this chapter, I examine the role of connection with the village in supporting individuals to move toward creative action in the canopy. I discuss the value of creating with community, including the aspects of witnessing, accountability, and collective visioning, and share participants’ stories evidencing the ways that being in the circle helped them to accomplish specific goals. I also discuss the role of the village in leadership, and the specific dynamic of the masculine-feminine.

The Value of Creating with Community

EOL participants reported that there is a uniquely transformative power that comes from being supported by a village in achieving one’s purpose and visions. In Living Deeply, Schlitz et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of being in a like-minded community, saying that it is “essential” to a transformative practice. They write:

When we asked our teachers how to integrate transformative realizations into everyday life and long-term shifts in ways of being, the most common response we received was to connect with a like-minded community. In fact, many teachers said that finding a like-minded community with whom you can share your transformative practice is essential... Moreover your community can serve as both a crucible for your transformation and a sanctuary for exploring new ideas and insights. (p. 139)

The idea of the community being both a crucible and a sanctuary describes the experience of EOL participants well. The EOL circle becomes a practice ground, in which individuals feel safe to experiment with taking risks and making changes, but in which they also feel supportively challenged to grow and expand. As will be seen in the ensuing section on accountability, the village as crucible means the circle encourages individuals
to go beyond their comfort zone to explore their edges and highest potential. This community then also becomes a foundation and a home base from which individuals move out to interface and create alliances with diverse groups as part of working toward broader social transformation.

Schlitz et al. (2007) cite social psychologist Lee Vygotsky’s theory regarding the role of social interaction in cognitive development to further their argument on the importance of community for transformation. Vygotsky defines the difference between one’s current level of development and their potential level of development as the “zone of proximal development.” He argues that one can only learn, transform, and achieve their higher level of potential through social interactions with peers or more advanced individuals who can provide reflection and guidance. (pp. 140–141). Schlitz el al. write, “Thus, for Vygotsky, development happens in the context of shared experience and connections with others.” (p. 141) If this is true, learning in the context of community is indeed essential for the individual to move from one state of development to the next.

Macy and Johnstone (2012) introduce another concept supporting the value of co-creating with a community. They write, “When people coordinate their actions through a collective thinking process, we can think of this as ‘distributed intelligence.’” Using the example of a group of musicians, they explain how the collective develops its own wisdom:

Something very interesting occurs when a group of jazz musicians improvise together. A number of separate individuals, all making their own decisions, act together as a whole. As the music flows, any of the musicians can take the solo spot, that leading role gliding seamlessly between the players. Who decides when the piano or trumpet player should come forward? It isn’t just the person playing that instrument, for the others have already stepped back a little to create an opening. There are two levels of thinking happening at the same time here; choices are made from moment to moment both by the group as a whole and by
the individuals within it... No one person is in charge; the players act freely while being guided by their intention to serve the purpose of the group. . . . When they tune into the group and become connected with it, it is as though the music itself plays through them. (pp. 99–100)

An important point from this analogy is that the individuals are “guided by their intention to serve the purpose of the group.” Thus although the individuals are each acting freely, they are doing so with a collective intention to be of service to the whole. With this as the foundation, the group can both find its collective song and support the expression of each individual member. In the next sections, I will describe some of the ways that this process of transformation through being part of the village takes places in EOL.

Witnessing

Just as it is deeply moving for participants to be witnessed in their vulnerability and authenticity as they learn to heal with the village, it is equally transformative to be witnessed in the creative process. Susan talks about how being in the circle helped her to identify her vision and to determine the steps to move toward it:

It’s a really powerful opportunity—to work your process in community—to be witnessed by community. To be seen and heard, and also it’s a really powerful support system if you’re feeling stuck. And if there’s somewhere you’re wanting to go but you don’t know how to get there. This program will provide the support to help you navigate all the steps it takes to create the transformation that you’re wanting. And to create something that’s aligned with your heart and with spirit. With the larger consciousness of what’s unfolding.

Susan also spoke about how watching others realize their potential helped her to see more possibility for herself:

I think if anything EOL helped me to awaken or to open to a wider range of possibilities so it wasn’t so narrow. And especially hearing the other participants and what they had created or manifested, and how powerful it was for them, it was great to see it happening and to know that that was possible for me too and to also have the experience of manifesting some things.
This collective value of witnessing of one another’s stories was modeled during the sharing circle that took place between Catrina, Brittany, Toni, and Jill. Toni shared the story of how she had come into EOL, and what had transformed for her through the process, after which the following dialogue ensued:

Wow—I’m really inspired and moved by your story, and how you articulate it …isn’t that amazing?—Catrina

It’s been important for me to hear you tell your story . . . it’s mirroring possibility in myself, and it’s a role model of just beautiful, committed, deep soul dedication story telling—that needs to be told, and with the patience and self-love that you have worked so hard for. I see it, and I’m so glad I do—I admire you so much as a teacher and as a sister and as a friend. I’m just really happy to be on this journey with you.—Brittany

This is part of my healing to receive the reflections . . . to hear back how I touch people…I think this is what it’s all about.”—Toni

Just being able to give you such feedback from my heart is such a gift for me . . . to not feel afraid to tell you how I feel about you—is so awesome.—Brittany

As demonstrated in the conversation, Toni’s story inspired the others to see more possibility for themselves. It was also healing for Toni to receive their reflections and support. This kind of mirroring happens frequently during the program circle time, and also in smaller groups such as pods and buddy relationships.

**Accountability**

Another key benefit of being connected to the circle while moving towards one’s visions and leadership is accountability support. This begins in the buddy relationships, with weekly calls to report on how the core routines and other aspects of the assignments are going for each person. It then extends out to the pods and to the whole circle. This is not intended to be punitive—each participant is given the freedom to determine their own
goals and terms of accountability. For example, my first buddy disliked the concept of being required to “report in” on his core routines and practices—perceiving this as meeting someone else’s external expectations. However, by reframing it as a celebration, we were able to meet the same objective from a different perspective. Each day we would write to each other and celebrate what we accomplished, rather than talk about what we had not done. It became a self-reinforcing practice, in which I looked forward to sharing my celebrations with him, and was eager to hear about his. In my experience, just knowing that at least one other person cares about my process and will be checking in to see how it is going is a significant motivator. Extending this to a pod or to the whole village increases the accountability—if I report to the whole group that I intend to complete a full draft of my dissertation, and know that they are expecting this, I am much more likely to complete it.

Lauren spoke to an even more nuanced understanding of accountability than just reporting in on one’s sit spot or journaling practice:

The circle is about accountability . . . I think that, without shaming anyone, the circle is here to say, are you sure that’s the choice you want to make? Do you want to try something different? Because we’re here to tell you it would be okay with us if you make a different choice right now, even if you’ve never done it before and it’s going to be a big mistake. The circle is a really safe place to be a little risky and it’s a very inviting community around being really authentic, even if it means not being super nice and polished. . . . And for a lot of us, probably the only taste that we’ve had of that in our life has been from maybe one person, but very seldom a group of people. Different things happen when it’s a group of people.

Lauren is noting that when in a circle, the group can also hold you accountable by supporting you to be more of your authentic self. This practice is mutually beneficial, as the whole village benefits from each individual’s achievement of his or her highest
potential. This is a radical shift on the notion of accountability, and particularly powerful for many EOL participants.

**Intimacy**

Participants voiced that being in a transformative process for five months, in which they felt encouraged and free to express their vulnerability and authenticity, cultivated a profound level of intimacy amongst the members of the circle. Regina said that she experienced a “deeper connection than I had ever felt to people and an intimacy that I didn’t know was possible with people other than lovers or partners.” This in turn had an effect on her relationships outside of EOL:

I think living with an open heart and just being open to intimacy from different relationships allows you to be stronger in each one of those relationships, because now I feel like I have intimate relationships with so many different kinds of people . . . Music relationships. Dancing. Just being able to be safe to connect deeply to all different people just makes life more rich and our relationships with each other more rich . . . I’ve just been amazed at what unfolds in just living in this . . . this way, open heartedness.

Susan also spoke about the impact of the circle on her life:

Being in the circle, that’s that feeling of love and connection and compassion that we have for each other. It’s so palpable it’s almost tangible, you know like you can really feel it. And I think that was really healing for me too.

The dialogue during the sharing circle also demonstrated this quality of intimacy. After Catrina shared her story, the following dialogue ensued:

I really admire your bravery—Toni

I see you being a strong woman and also an excited little girl—and together they just are so beautiful…It really feels good to love you.—Brittany

I am so grateful—I feel like my heart is just bursting open.—Catrina
(Comment to the others about Catrina): She’s really taken to loving and hugging me—and that hasn’t been so easy for that to happen for me.—Brittany

One can feel the warmth of intimacy and love that was produced through the conversation—even in the context of the recorded data collection setting of the sharing circle. Some of the participants had just met the day before, but through vulnerable and authentic sharing, they all emerged from the experience feeling deeply connected. The group left the circle laughing and smiling radiantly, as can be seen in the photos captured in Figures 13.1 and 13.2.

Being Held by the Group in our Visions

With the support of witnessing, accountability, and being in a circle based upon intimacy and connection, participants reported that they felt held and supported in moving toward their goals and visions. Elyse’s story is a beautiful example of this. When she first met James at an EOL introductory talk, she was brought to tears by the creative scene of having a family and a baby. She had been struggling with infertility for some time, and was feeling extremely frustrated and vulnerable. For her to share this vision with the group was a significant leap of faith:
And it was a huge edge for me to share with the group, because . . . everybody warns you don’t say anything because if it fails, then you set it up and you got to say it didn’t work out. It’s going to be a let down on top of a let down. I just felt like I didn’t want to believe that. I wanted to believe that I was sharing part of a story with you guys being there to celebrate with me, and I’d put that in my mind. And I felt like that was part of a spark. Yea, that everyone together helped me get there.

Elyse truly believed that the group’s support helped her become pregnant and deliver a healthy, full-term baby (see Figure 13.3):

I felt like it was the collaborative group thought—that there was a little more energy out there kind of helping support an idea. And that’s how I thought maybe, in my mind, it helps bring it more into reality, because I shared the preface of infertility with a few people.

Through EOL individuals have the opportunity to practice sharing their visions and being supported in them. Support from her buddy gave Catrina the confidence required to move through a major transition in her life:

I felt like, like you know when you pry open an oyster, my world kind of cracked open . . . I needed that one experience. I could have never had the faith in myself, the confidence to move forward without my buddy talks.

Carl spoke about sharing his intention to move, and how quickly it was supported by someone in the group:

I put it out there “I’m moving from the city to Sonoma County” and lo and behold one friend raises his hand and says “I may have a cottage I want to rent out.” So… it’s one thing to trust, it’s another thing to witness the trust manifesting in a way that is really supportive and helps you achieve and realize your dreams and aspirations.
In many cases, the goals that one person wants to accomplish are shared by someone else in the group, and two or more people are able to support one another. In EOL-9, one person described his vision of creating an intentional community where he could live with his partner, her son and daughter-in-law, and their new grandchild. This resonated for another woman who was a farmer, and together they began to work toward making the dream a reality. One and a half years later, the three families purchased a 90-acre farm (See Figure 13.4), have already moved onto the site, and are preparing the land and creating their community.

In the following, Regina talks about what makes a circle truly transformative.

She said that it’s not just being in a circle, but being with a group of people who are:

- Caring to listen to people’s visions and to encourage these people who have so much passion about how to make this world a better place and who feel like they’re on the edge and on this fringe . . . being in a place where that is valued in a circle with facilitators and a strong team of people who are just committed to people being fully alive and fully in their gifts so that they can contribute to this world that they’re meant to contribute . . . it felt so great to be in a place that was doing that.

This is similar to Lauren’s point above—that to be in the village means really caring for one another and supporting each person to fulfill their highest potential.
**Cultivating Support Outside of the Village**

For many participants, the EOL experience of being witnessed, held accountable, and supported in one’s visions is a gateway to new possibilities. The next step is learning to create this kind of support outside of the EOL village. Carle learned to do this while still in the program. As her project was to develop her voice through singing, she asked a number of individuals in her community outside of EOL to be stakeholders for her. She said, “It was just so beautiful. Asking people to be stakeholders. Just that was exciting. Because people just received me in such a loving way.” Ericka also learned the value of cultivating support elsewhere. She said,

One thing that changed since then is that I went and asked someone to be my mentor. So it’s not a buddy thing but its like—she’s older, works in the same field I work in. I check in every quarter, we go out for lunch and then I tell her about my goals and she checks on me. I check on her too but it’s more a mentor relationship. So I let myself be mentored.

The RLP components of identifying your stakeholders and community encourages participants to think ecologically in this way, and to expand their network of support beyond the EOL village to the wider community.

**Village Connection and Leadership**

For many people, the experience of being in the EOL village gives them the confidence to develop their leadership skills. Prior to EOL, Toni was hesitant to speak in front of a group. She said,

A big edge for me was talking in front of people . . . or reaching out to people . . . I used to in the past always be sitting on the side and wait for someone to come to me, if it’s with a hug, or acknowledgement, or a question or whatever, but it’s a lot riskier to put yourself out there in the place of unknown, or expressing a need, or speaking your truth, or asking for what you want. So it gave me kind of a playground for me to experiment with those characteristics that I needed to embody.
By practicing these skills in EOL, she gained the strength to step forward:

That was a huge obstacle for me to step into leadership . . . so I did it! . . . And since EOL I’ve really created community gatherings, and it’s really helped empower me into…to take this huge leap of faith—and knowing that once I jump off this cliff of this next phase of my life, my whole life is going to change. . . .

And I knew that that bigness was coming, and I think I needed EOL to help give me that last little push to step into that huge shift, because it’s still unfolding for my life—I’m living in it.

As with the qualities of vulnerability and authenticity, being in the safe container of the village also gives participants the opportunity to practice their confidence as leaders. Tara spoke about how through EOL and the support of the village she developed the confidence to lead community gatherings:

I have fifty people Monday night coming to hear me speak about a community learning garden that we’re starting up next month . . . (without EOL) I would have been scared to death. That wouldn’t have been able to move forward. I would have been like, “Oh, great vision. Yea let’s get it to this point and then I’d get it to a certain point and be like terrified and it’s like, oh never mind, I’m not going there.’ Now I can feel I can move past that. . . . Recognizing the awareness of my fears and letting go and living that edge of, “Okay, this doesn’t feel really comfortable, but I’m going to do it anyways.”

There are many comparable stories of personal growth and accomplished goals and projects that participants believed they never could have achieved without the support of the village. I will present more examples of those overall transformations in the next chapter.

The Village and Renewing the Relationship of the Masculine and Feminine

An unexpected finding of my research regards the transformative power of EOL for influencing relationships between the genders as well as for balancing the masculine and feminine dynamics within each individual. Although EOL was founded by two men,
several participants noted how the program made them more aware of their feminine nature through its focus on creating a safe space for vulnerability. Michelle said, “And so there was a lot of personality shift. I just became more soft, more yin, more humble, feminine.” Ericka also shared that through EOL she was able “to find myself as a woman but female, and then to be okay with being vulnerable.” This was significant for Ericka, who had previously believed that she could not be feminine and also successful in her life and career. Male participants also identified that they became more comfortable with expressing their vulnerability and archetypally “feminine” qualities such as surrender and receptivity through the program.

Carle spoke about how she saw EOL as helping to balance the more feminine or inner transformation work through emotional healing with the outer or more masculine aspects of creation. She said,

A lot of the work is around the sacred feminine, around the watery energy of emotion and the kind of subconscious of what’s happening under the surface… You’re doing the internal work so you can go out into the world and put out good things, which is actually masculine, but we’re doing kind of the feminine at EOL.

Carle’s insight represents an alternative way to view the tree model—that the inner work represents the feminine, and the outer work the masculine.

One of the curricular components of EOL is to divide into gender-based circles during

*Figure 13.5—Men serving the women dinner during the men’s and women’s circles evening – EOL-10*
one of the weekends. These circles historically were defined as “men’s” and “women’s” circles; however, in recent circles a growing awareness has been brought in by participants regarding gender fluidity and the question is being raised of how to have these circles feel inclusive for those who are transgendered or identify more on a gender spectrum. The recent circles have evolved to divide based on being “male-bodied” and “female-bodied,” a suggestion made by a queer couple who participated in EOL-11, and participants can also self-select which group they join. Despite these challenges of inclusivity, the curricular aspect of dividing the group remains a part of the program, as participants have expressed that it is extremely powerful to share with those who have had similar life experiences by virtue of being like-bodied.

At the end of the circles, the two come together for a closing. Regina and Lauren both spoke about the power of the gender circles, and of their reunion with the male-bodied group. Regina said:

One of the bigger things that impacted me in EOL, in the actual program, was men’s and women’s work and separating into men’s and women’s circles. And being with the women and just speaking our needs, and then men doing the same and then coming back. I remember standing in a small circle with the women and the men surrounding us and singing an African honoring song. It was so beautiful. I remember being on the inside of the circle and just having an incredible healing moment and crying and feeling like that was one of the moments that struck me of intimacy, healing so part of me that was so deep and hidden and so related to the masculine and the feminine, but now I see that it was just this archetype of the masculine and the feminine being healed, and it didn’t have to be in an intimate relationship to get to that place. To actually be held by all the men in this community and all the women standing together in this community, and all of us feeling that. It was an Earth shattering, shaking moment for all of us. One woman hit the ground, I remember; just fell to her knees crying. That kind of healing happens there.

So that’s magic. And that started a journey. Wow, we can heal this kind of wound that happens between masculine and feminine energy in relationships. It doesn’t have to be man and woman. Just that intimacy in a relationship.
Regina makes some powerful points about the depth of the pain that is related to the
dynamic between the masculine and the feminine, and the possibility for this to be healed
in a village—not just in intimate partnership. She also describes this dynamic as being
representative of the masculine and feminine energy in all relationships, and recognizes
the importance of its role in cultivating more intimacy.

Lauren was in the same EOL program with Regina, but shared some different
pieces of the story:

In the women’s circle, we were sitting around the fire area and had been actually
talking already for a good 25 minutes or something. And some important things
had been said and there was just the safety of women together, checking in, the
“safety.” When one of the women in the group said, “Okay I haven’t said
anything yet so I’m going to speak now, and I just want you to know that I hate
women’s circles.” And it was like, anyone else who had been feeling that way and
just wasn’t going to say it and was trying to embrace it, everyone dove in…so we
as women, there was just such a tremendous breakthrough on our own around (the
resistance to women’s circles)... and then after having just such a profound
healing and kind of being honest and authentic with each other, to have already
had such a lovely time there, to then hear at a distance this melody of all men’s
voices coming, coming closer, coming closer. And then actually encircling us.
And in a very, I want to be careful that I’m not kind of speaking against gender
preference... I want to say it in sort of a masculine, feminine understanding. For
the feminine to be encircled by the masculine in such a protective way and in such
an honoring way, and to allow the masculine to be in its strength and in its
softness through song. And as a female to really feel the completion of the yin
yang in that way, that was really good. I kind of melted in that moment.

The story of the woman who “hates women’s circles” has come up in other EOL
programs, and it highlights a significant aspect of the dynamics of gender—that often
even within the genders, particularly among women but also between men, there can be a
lack of trust and solidarity with one another. The healing of gender dynamics therefore
calls for the need to develop more authentic, positive relationships both between the
genders as well as within.
Some female participants found the prospect of being in a program with men threatening. Prior to EOL, Jill was not even speaking to men, but by carpooling with a man on her first weekend she was able to connect with him and to open up:

When I first decided to come to EOL, I was really wanting to carpool—so I sent out to the email list who wants to carpool, and someone from Willets responded . . . Well it turned out to be a guy. And at that point in my life, I really wasn’t talking to guys—you know, all guys were assholes . . . On the way home, we really shared our stories . . . and it was a real opening for me to talk to a male. And he had such a similar story to mine . . . knowing that there’s good people and that if I’m sensitive to who I share my story with, that they will take care of my heart.

Jill found it difficult that EOL had two male facilitators, but she learned to trust James and Christopher and eventually became a member of the alumni facilitation team. Carle also felt challenged at first with having only male facilitators:

One thing that came up for me was that James and Christopher are men, and . . . I’m so starving for female elder mentorship. Admittedly I think they both hold the feminine really well, so it wasn’t as big of an issue, but at first I was like, okay, two dudes. Where is the sacred feminine in this equation? That was something that came up . . . But I think it might have a larger story with something happening culturally . . . And I think men could really benefit from more of that work, so I’m glad James and Christopher are in the world doing that work. And I think the majority of our circle were women, and I imagine most EOL circles are mostly women.

Carle makes an important point—that there are still few women in leadership roles in most fields and organizations, including the transformative educational sector, and yet most of the participants in programs like EOL tend to be women. Healing this
imbalance is part of the transformation that EOL is working toward. My role on the core leadership and instruction teams has been part of this shift, and we have received positive feedback from participants that I have brought an important feminine presence to the program.

Carle went on to say that the rebalancing of the masculine and feminine is part of what is needed for the world’s cultural and ecological transformation:

I feel like it’s (EOL’s) the inner feminine watery place and culturally that’s really where we need to go right now. Really cultivate and nourish and nurture that place because culturally we’ve been in the masculine and it’s just been imbalanced. And it’s just about finding that balance again.

Similarly, our environmental problems, I feel like it’s about an imbalance. When we slow down and we’re able to hold the feminine and the masculine, we’re able to honor the place of all things and the places in ourselves that are dark and shadowy, and the earth.

Having been inspired by organizations like Bioneers that are bringing together nature-based and feminine models of leadership, I agree with Carle that replacing the current paradigm with one that re-balances the masculine model with earth and feminine-based qualities of leadership is part of what is needed as we go forward at the global level. As Carle points out, in addition to moving toward more balance between the masculine and feminine in the interactions of participants, there is a transformation occurring within, a more balanced integration of the inner, emotional, vulnerable, more feminine aspects and the outward, creative, more masculine energies. The EOL village presents a small test field for practicing these concepts and learning how to renew the relationship of the masculine and feminine.
Towards the Ecology of Transformation

In Part Three, we have journeyed into the canopy to see what becomes possible for participants in their outward-focused actions, lives, and leadership through connection with themselves, with nature, and with the village. Participants reported feeling significant support in advancing their endeavors in the world through their practices and relationships in each of these areas. In the final part of this dissertation, I will look holistically at what happens when participants combine their inner work in the roots and soil and their outer work in the canopy, to create the unique alchemy of the “Ecology of Transformation.”
PART FIVE: THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE WORLD

In this chapter, I examine how inner and outer work in the soil, roots, and canopy, when combined with practices for reconnection with self, nature, and village, leads to holistic change. Reflecting back to the multifaceted experiences of disconnection and also sensed possibilities that brought participants into the program, I will reveal how these individuals experienced major changes in those areas, including in their personal lives, intimate relationships, families, careers, homes, leadership, and service in the world. I also discuss the overall transformations that occurred for participants as a result of EOL.

Changes Within Oneself

When asked about their transformation through the program, many participants reported significant internal growth and development, citing examples of improved capabilities in the areas of love, curiosity, trust, courage, self-acceptance, vulnerability, authenticity, balance, joy, and presence. Correspondingly, issues of fear, shame, self-doubt, and judgment were considerably diminished.

Donna, who in Chapter Four talked about her struggle with being authentic in leadership roles, said that she now felt the “courage to bring difficult things forward . . . courage to be who I am. I’m much more self-loving.” Carl also spoke about how he was able to become more courageous through EOL. James noted this improvement in Carl in our interview with him, saying: “One thing is that I’m feeling (in you) is an absence of fear.” Carl responded:

Thank you for seeing that and thank you for bringing that up. Because that is probably—maybe it’s so obvious for me now that I don’t really bring it up
anymore but that really is the bottom line. Well really the bottom line is love. But love is the absence of fear.

James discussed the damaging effect of fear when it is present, saying, “It’s hard to be at home—to really feel at home—if there’s a high bar or baseline of fear. And the fear ecology really has a devastating effect.” Carl spoke about how central that was for him in EOL, having “definitely bought into a fear-based society” before the program, and that he now feels largely free of it, saying, “I think the absence of fear has become so a part of my life that I am a fish out of water around fear.” Tara also learned to release her fears:

You know, a lot of fears are subsiding. . . . I just see tons of possibilities, and I think that if I just use these tools, you know, all the energy that I don’t need to spend on all this inside struggle that I can spend outward, all the energy that I can spend outwardly creating something better. . . . [Without EOL] I would have been scared to death… I’d get it to a certain point and be like terrified and it’s like, oh never mind, I’m not going there.’ Now I can feel I can move past that. . . . Recognizing the awareness of my fears and letting go and living that edge of “Okay, this doesn’t feel really comfortable, but I’m going to do it anyways.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, this shift enabled Tara to lead gatherings for 50 people and to move forward with her dreams to start a permaculture business.

Ericka said that she became more present and balanced after EOL:

I think it brought me to a place where I can be more balanced and therefore more effective in what I do. I feel more mature. I think that also is connected—the balance, putting priorities in life. . . . It’s not like “I have a goal and I have to reach it.” That’s how I used to see life. Now I know “there’s a flower here, there a beautiful thing there” . . . to give more value and see more the invisible things. Things you don’t give so much importance to. More like to stop and smell the roses, and have more balance. That’s the difference I’m seeing in myself.

As described in Part Four by Ericka, the life wheel was a key tool for her in finding this balance in her personal and professional life.

Carl said that he also felt more compassionate and less judgmental:

I’m a much more empathetic and compassionate person I think as a result of EOL . . . I can judge a lot less. There are still judgments that come up but the magic,
talking about magic, is walking through the mall and seeing this person that you
don’t know and seeing them as a divine human being. And seeing that every
person in this mall is exactly the same. They just have different makeup on, a
different costume. I don’t think I was able to do that before EOL.

Susan, who was struggling with her identity when she entered EOL, spoke about
learning self-acceptance: “Just knowing that . . . we’re all creating change together but
we’re also learning to love ourselves exactly as we are. Totally magical.” She highlights a
critical component of EOL—that it supports individuals to change while simultaneously
helping them to love and accept themselves as they are. This apparent paradox is also the
predecessor to loving and accepting others, as pointed out by Donna in the following:

Being able to receive my own love and compassion. And then, if I can do that for
myself, then I can certainly do that for other people. But if I’m judging myself,
that’s going to be projected onto others. The more I’m engaged into self love, the
more accepting, loving and open, compassionate I can be with others. And it’s
really . . . that’s what’s really transforming some of those key relationships, like
with Marie or my husband.

As Donna mentions, participants also experienced profound transformations in their
relationships outside of the EOL community as a result of the program. This will be
discussed in the following section.

Changes in Interpersonal Relationships

Intimate Partnerships

Many participants reported shifts in their most intimate partnerships and
marriages. The trigger ownership process in particular supported the transformation of
these relationships. Elyse said,

I feel a deeper connection with my husband right now. I feel like we’re able to
just openly communicate more. I think one of my triggers is I can shut down in
my own head. We get in a disagreement and I make distance, so we’re starting to
work through that.
Donna also reported an improvement in her relationship with her husband. As discussed earlier, she and her husband were at a transition point in their marriage prior to her enrollment in EOL, and she was concerned that the commitment might move them apart. She wondered, “If I engage more deeply in this work, where does that leave us?” Her experience, however, was that EOL helped them to connect more deeply. She said:

> There’s definitely been shifts with David where I can own so many more pieces of my own judgment and expectation and be much more able to sit with this sweetness of who he is and share my stories. Like, here’s my story about you and he’s like “I don’t know where you got that from, but let’s get it out there.” So just realizing how many stories I held over the years. . . . Taking those layers off has been an amazing experience and there’s just more and more sweetness with the connection with him over the years. I’m loving that.

By becoming more authentic, practicing the ownership process and meeting her husband in Rumi’s Field, Donna is discovering new aspects of their relationship.

Ericka maintains that her EOL experience helped to save her marriage. When she started the program, she had separated from her husband. Through EOL, and particularly the practices of gratitude and Rumi’s Field, she said:

> I started to look on the good side of things, like being grateful. That’s definitely a big thing. Look towards what you’re grateful for. Don’t focus on what you’re not so grateful for. And even what you think is negative it comes up to show you something. So you have to be grateful to that too. So I went back to him and then really embraced the relationship for the good and bad. And now basically nowadays our marriage is great and our relationship—now we’ve been married for 11 years.

Ericka could not point to anything specific that has changed in their dynamic or in her husband—it’s that she has changed her own relationship to the marriage and is learning to accept the good and the bad, and to be grateful for all of it. Tara was also on the brink of a divorce when she entered EOL, and reported that through the process, “My husband’s and my relationship is being repaired.”
In Part Three, I discussed how Jeff M. learned about his own unavailability for intimate relationships through an inner tracking process. As a result of EOL, he opened up to the possibility of “turning that around to availability.” He began online dating, and said that he:

Had a really awesome experience. . . . That feeling in that allowed me to feel into the space of what it’s like to actually have a fun, a good relationship. What that means to be available, have someone else be available. What that’s actually like. So that was a cool experience to learn.

Becoming more available for relationships through the inner and outer practices of EOL is a common experience for participants. Lauren had a similar issue relative to romantic relationships, and was supported by a buddy who helped her solve an issue in her roots system that was causing the problem:

I was talking about sort of why I didn’t think it was possible for me. . . . All of the obstacles in my path preventing me from having a relationship, a romantic relationship. And that conversation, having a buddy there to pick apart what I was saying with a little more tenderness, but critical… We actually figured out that it had everything to do with something that was in my root system from being about 17 or so, and that as soon as I was able to really see that, then I could write an online profile and start online dating. And not only could I start online dating but I could have fun and I could meet incredibly great guys who were really fun to talk with, you know, rocking my world. And it had absolutely nothing to do with all of the other reasons that I had said I wasn’t going to be able to date in the Bay Area.

This is an excellent example of the interplay between the inner and the outer realms, demonstrating that when there are blockages in the root system, it can be hard to make changes in the canopy—be it in existing relationships or in cultivating new ones—but that these things can shift quickly once one engages an inner tracking process and releases the nuggets that are in the way. Jeff and Lauren are not alone—a number of participants have made it their EOL project to open up to relationship and dating. Many
who had felt stuck in this area of their life wheel for years began serious relationships or even got married a short time after completion of the program.

EOL can also help participants identify relationships that are no longer healthy and provide tools for a peaceful process of completion. Regina reported that the trigger ownership process helped her to get clear about needing to end a relationship:

Learning about my own triggers and taking my own responsibility for them and tracking was immensely helpful. And just knowing if I should leave that relationship or not. It just really helped me sift through it. And it also helped me heal this pattern instead of attracting the same person again and having the same thing happen. I knew I wanted to get to the bottom of those patterns with this person who was really willing and wanting to do that too and wanting to heal. So it was great. I could track what was my pattern and what was just a pattern that was playing out, and really release and work that trigger to that I wasn’t triggered anymore in that relationship. I tried to get there and really got to where it wasn’t that we were driving each other crazy or triggering each other with this silly things that had these huge roots to our bodies or childhoods, but we got to a place where we could look at each other and say is this serving us anymore and is this relationship what we vision? I got really in touch with my vision and he got really in touch with his vision. So these tools really helped me see that. And we were able to say no, this isn’t serving. And know that I was still coming from a place of love. And I think that’s really the bottom line. You’re still in love with the world, the vision, the person. I still really loved him. And was able to just say that.

Regina came to a place of clarity, by sticking with the inner tracking process. She also identified and worked through some of her inner patterns so that she will not repeat the same mistakes in relationships in the future. It was only when she had actually worked through the triggers that she could be clear in her decision about the relationship. By engaging the EOL tools she also ended it in a positive and loving way:

I remember us remarking during that time that we were splitting up, just, wow, this is not as hard as I thought it would be. And it’s much more loving than I ever thought it would be. . . . We dug deep and forgave each other for the things we were holding onto, and anger that was still in there around certain things. So, I think all those tools are incredible. It makes me feel like I can get through anything with anyone. It’s pretty amazing.
This was an empowering process for Regina, which made her feel like she now has effective tools for her relationships with all people.

I had a similar experience of using the EOL tools to support me in going through a relationship completion. When I began my research collaboration with EOL, I had been in a marital separation for 1.5 years. The first creative scene I made was for a conversation with my then husband, to communicate that I was ready to end the marriage and seek a divorce. It was making the creative scene and believing in its potential for transformation, together with engagement of other EOL practices that supported that conversation. The morning that we had agreed to talk, I awoke, practiced gratitude, and set intentions for the conversation. I then wrote an email to the EOL-8 circle asking them to visualize the creative scene being manifested—and received an abundance of loving, supportive responses. The conversation went surprisingly well and I began to feel the power of the EOL tools’ capability to transform my relationships from the inside out.

A year later, we planned a family trip to visit my parents. I made a condition for the trip that we make a creative scene for our time together. Although it was challenging at first to collaborate, we came up with a beautiful vision for our trip. We went on vacation the next week, and had our best family vacation to date. This did not mean that we were getting back together romantically—I was clear about ending the marriage—but the creative scene, which was to be a connected, loving, enjoyable, authentic family trip together, unfolded as we had envisioned it. As we negotiated the divorce, we made another creative scene for our co—parenting relationship and our relationship as a family, and that has been an incredible foundation and vision for our new family structure. Although it is not always easy, we are still very close, see one another on a daily basis,
and share more connection, authenticity, vulnerability, and genuine love than we did while we were married. This speaks of the power of EOL to transform relationships, by releasing expectations of what something should be while engaging in a heart—sourced process of designing one’s life.

**Family Relationships**

As I have just described, family relationships is another major area of transformation for people through EOL. Having already addressed this in several sections of this dissertation, I will highlight a few more examples here. Carle, who came into EOL with an unidentified nugget from being taken away from her parents as a child, said, “I feel like the way I’m able to relate to my parents is different. The way that I show up in those relationships. . . . EOL opened up a lot of those things.” Elyse also cited the EOL experience as changing her relationship with her family: “(I’m) trying to be forgiving with family. I know I have some work to do, but trying to at least make the space to work at that.” Lauren, realizing that she is much like her mother as a consequence of the life story exercise, said that EOL has helped heal that relationship: “I mentioned my mom. I
mean there’s been a lot of healing in that relationship in part because I’ve learned how to ask for help.” She went on to say that the support of the village and from Christopher in particular helped improve that relationship.

Participants who are parents talked about the influence of EOL on their relationships with their children. Tara said, “My kids and my relationship is moving in a different direction.” For my part, I have introduced practices into my family, such as gratitude, that have been transformative. One Thanksgiving, we were in the car stuck in traffic. I suggested that we practice gratitude, and my children, ages 3 and 6 at the time, their father, and I went around from person to person, sharing gratitude, for at least 45 minutes. My children are now familiar with this practice, and regularly share their gratitude, often before a meal or in the car as we are driving to school in the morning.

For Ericka, getting pregnant and having a child was the most transformative experience of her time in EOL. This led to changes in her family life and her relationship with her parents. She said:

When your child is born it’s a blessing and things come together. Really my family came together in a way that I didn’t see it before. And it would not probably happen if I didn’t have the kid. My mom spent three months with me . . . and my father came and spent two months.

Ericka’s parents live in Brazil and the new grandchild was cause for extended visits from each of them. EOL’s role in participants conceiving and having children has been discussed in this dissertation through the examples of Ericka and Elyse. Other participants have also made starting families their project, and have returned to Bolinas to show off their new babies, sometimes less than a year after program completion.
Alexandra was already pregnant when she began EOL and in part joined the program to have the support of a village while becoming a mother. As shared in Part Four when discussing the metaphor of the spider web, she had the opportunity to experience what it was like to be held by a village through the process of pregnancy and birth. Logan was born after the second weekend, and she brought him with her for the rest of the program. I facilitated the women’s circle that year while holding Logan so that Alexandra could be present and participate, and it was a wonderful gift to include an infant in the village.

EOL also supports participants with family transitions at the other end of the life stage. Michelle spoke about how she used EOL processes such as the creative scene and building a community of stakeholders in her caregiver role with her dying father:

I had a big leadership role in his life as his care manager, guardian, medical advocate and also supporting his ideal scene for his end of life… I did use some (creative) scene work for it… because I was stepping into worlds where I wanted us to be friendly and diplomatic, but there was this clash of cultures, the medical world. Because of the distinctions that I drew out of EOL, these were allies. . . . I learned how to build an ecology of stakeholders for his creative scene for his (passing). . . . I just learned a lot through EOL that I used during probably one of the biggest rites of initiation in my life and something that was extremely important: the crossing over of someone I loved very deeply.

Michelle demonstrates how the EOL tools can be used even with others who aren’t aware of the program, e.g. through her reframing of the medical staff as allies and stakeholders.
for her father’s creative scene. Michelle, who initially participated in the very first EOL circle, has now returned as a participant in the current circle (EOL—12) after fourteen years of caring for her father before his death. This second round in EOL is giving her the opportunity to envision how to move forward in her life after such a long period of service. She said,

I feel like a big chunk of my life . . . I’ve got it back. And there’s just no words for the kind of gratitude I feel for that. . . . Because I was kind of lost, you know. So thanks for that. That’s really, really big.

Changes in the World

Making wide—scale transformation in the world is approached in EOL from two perspectives. First, the program sees itself as an incubator or model for creating systemic change. The model of the village is an experimental ground in which participants can both co—create as well as experience a new way of being together as a mini—society. As the village develops and embodies more of the qualities of the new culture, participants are supported by this change in the system to transform individually, as was seen in the previous chapters. Although this is just a microcosm of the wider society, devoid of some of the more overt power structures and systems such as economic and political hierarchies and power imbalances that affect the individual in society, nevertheless it is a way for participants to experience what it is like to be in a different form of society that reflects the values of the Great Turning. The hope of the program is that experiencing this both creates a blueprint for what is possible at the same time as it supports the individual members to make more significant changes in their lives.

Second, the individual is considered an agent of change that is empowered through the program. EOL is designed to support each individual participant to go out
and make change in their own lives as well as in their relationships, communities, and service path in the world. As the program intends to empower each person to find their own North Star, it is not held as an agenda by the program that participants “should” or must direct the change they are make toward explicit environmental or social justice objectives. That said, the program itself was designed and is framed within the context of the Great Turning, and participants who are attracted to EOL frequently are carrying this lens and see their contributions in this context. Many of the projects that participants take on have this flavor—be it changing their career to take on more meaningful work in the world or working toward a direct service goal.

*Meaningful Work in the World*

In this vein, an area in which many participants experienced a shift following EOL is in their work in the world. Carl, who entered EOL having had the realization that he was “part of the problem,” not the solution, decided to leave his job:

> I made the decision to leave my corporate career of 18 years and with absolutely no idea of what I was going to do, but just trusting that this was—that there was something more meaningful out there for me.

Carl ended up taking a job with Transition US, one of the leading organizations supporting grassroots citizens to work toward a sustainable future. He said:

> I’m on staff at Transition U.S. and we support hundreds of local community groups and grassroots organizers and leaders in the initiation of their transition town groups and initiatives. . . . For the last few years they were able to get over 1,500 particular actions in one county on one particular weekend around this idea of growing food, conserving water, saving energy and growing community. This is our second year, and what we’ve done is take that national.

Some participants change careers; others are able to use their EOL experience to transform their current work situation. In Chapter Four I discussed Lauren’s
dissatisfaction with her job, in which the corporate ladder had driven her further and further from what she liked most about her work. Through her experience in EOL she was able to return to her job with a renewed perspective. She said:

My attitude after being in EOL was just restored. At work, I didn’t feel as downtrodden. I think I was really clear when I went back to work that there were certain things at that job that I was not going to be able to change, but that the job didn’t need to change me.

Lauren did eventually change jobs, however, using EOL tools to achieve happiness in the first job helped Lauren to develop the clarity needed to then find new work. This reflects Regina’s process around completing her relationship—rather than focusing on the external circumstance as the problem, and sourcing from blame or judgment in making a decision to leave the relationship or job, both women worked first to transform themselves inwardly within the situation. They were then able to see their next steps clearly and to change the outer situations in a good way.

Carle was also unhappy in her work when she entered EOL, feeling stuck as I described in Chapter Four. Without a safety net or plan, she quit her job the week before her EOL graduation. Although she went through a challenging transition period, she has now found work that she loves:

I’m working for a non-profit, who I love, called Ecology Center. And I run a project called the Farmer’s Market EBT project. So I get to basically help farmer’s markets all over the state accept food stamps. So it’s kind of like involving my passion around local sustainable food systems and also social justice. And I love the organization. It’s just very holistic.

Jeff M., another participant experiencing job dissatisfaction, was inspired by his experience as a member of the EOL facilitation team to take a counseling and coaching training program.
At the end of the second round, I got a clear sense for what’s my next step. I got connected with the sense of, “Wow, I really have enjoyed the facilitation part of this. There’s a strong part of me that’s like, I want to do this. I want to keep helping with this. But I also had recognition that this was James and Christopher’s program. I needed to go find my own…. It was a good next step for me to follow that out and kind of think about how can I do change facilitation. Is there a way for me to do counseling? . . . I feel I have some awesome talent at being with people and sort of see what might be going on with them. Seeing what might be standing in their way and trying to work out ways in which they can actually unfold in their experience. And the name I came up with for it is regenerative counseling… The roots of what I’m doing all came during that time (in EOL).

Jeff’s experience is not uncommon—several participants, including Nalini and Regina, discovered their love for facilitation, counseling and group work through their experience in EOL and went on to pursue similar career paths.

The common theme for most participants is that through EOL they feel supported to pursue more meaningful work. Susan described this as “following my heart and . . . your ‘service path’ . . . your life’s work.” This aligns with Rabbi Michael Lerner’s assertion that what most people are looking for is lives of purpose and meaning. He said:

The meaning most people seek is achieved when we find some way to connect our own lives to the unfolding of Spirit in the universe. That might sound like a rather difficult task, but, in fact, it comes through a recognition that we, like all other aspects of Being, are manifestations of Spirit. . . . Our ultimate meaning is to be an answer to the cosmic need. The closer we get to experiencing our lives as service to this calling, the closer we get to experiencing a sense of meaning and purpose in life. (2000)

Through connecting with their visions in EOL, and with the deeper calling of that “cosmic need” or seed that is wanting to grow to its potential, participants feel empowered and supported to follow their hearts to pursue work that they love.

**Home**

Another area that shifted for participants was in the area of home. Regina found a new home right at Commonweal Garden, where she moved to be a farm intern. She said,
Other things about my life now that I never would have imagined are just living up here. Living on this beautiful farm. Being connected to this community. It’s really great, on site healing action.

Becoming directly connected to the RDI community gave Regina an opportunity to explore the areas that opened up for her in EOL on a daily basis.

Ericka, who shared in Chapter Four that prior to EOL she didn’t feel at home after moving to the US, stated that, “After EOL, because of my practices, I felt at home. I felt that I was part of this, here.” EOL gave her the support she needed to feel comfortable living in a country far from her native Brazil.

Susan, who was living with her parents when she started EOL, found support for moving to a new home as well as a new career:

I think EOL was crucial, like it just supported me in . . . making this move to Berkeley from Sacramento. Really just going, getting clearer on my vision. . . . “This is what we want and deserve . . . something better for the highest good.” . . . We ended up in this huge house for amazingly cheap. Beautiful, 1906, you know, three living rooms. Just a really nice community space.

I have already discussed the examples of my finding my current home through the sit spot and creative scene practices, and Jeff Z. realizing his creative scene by moving in with his girlfriend, also an EOL participant. It makes sense that given the inner shifts that take place for participants through the program, outer realities such as where one is living also change.

**Changes in Leadership**

Several participants were able to bring their experience in EOL directly into leadership roles. In Carl’s new position with Transition US, he applies the inner tracking tools through deep listening:
I work with the ability to listen as opposed to try to solve a problem or interject my own point of view... peeling back the layers and maybe even guiding that person through the process of getting to what the heart of the issue is because it’s not usually just that first or second layer, it’s deeper.

As already discussed, Ericka uses a gratitude practice and the life wheel in her work in community and in offering leadership trainings. Donna, an Executive Director, took many of the EOL tools directly into her organization. She said, “we use creative scenes... (we are) doing it right now with regards to a new position.” They also use creative scenes to envision how they want to operate as an organization. She said that she brings this visioning format into her board meetings, asking the board members:

“What do you want to show up? First you need to be clear about what you want.” So to be able to do that has been very powerful in our organization. We all practice that... We do intentions setting and a gratitude sharing before every meeting. We check in to see if there’s anything that people need to express that keeps that from being fully present. So we do all of those. It’s fun. It’s pretty cool at a board meeting to be able to do that.

Donna said that the use of these tools has helped make the organization a safe space for vulnerability and authenticity:

It’s really powerful. I can show up at a board meeting and say I’m feeling really scared or queasy. I can start the board meeting off that way. It’s super supportive. ... I can’t even imagine what it would be like for me now to go get a regular job. I think I would just be in such culture shock. My daughter say to me sometimes, nobody talks that way. Well, everybody I’m around does. I’m surrounded by people who do this. So, it’s amazing what we’ve created.

Donna began EOL questioning her validity as an Executive Director... she now feels proud that they are creating new models:

I tell myself, “Who would have hired me as Executive Director?” I didn’t have any experience with that. But I had grown up with it and kind of created it as I went along. I made this whole thing up, which is really cool. To the point where, I’ve heard other people in other organizations, who had experienced one of our board meetings, say to other places: you should see how they do this thing... We made it up how it worked for us. So I’m realizing we’re actually starting to become a model for other people, which is really cool.
Donna has found her own authentic model of leadership, and now is inspiring others to also learn from and adopt those models in their organizations.

On a smaller scale, Jill brought the circle model into her intentional community. She said, “We’ve started a circle in my community and it’s really helping people to stop sourcing so much from fear. It’s really wonderful. That’s changing my life.”

**Service to Others**

Whereas some of the participants’ projects focus on more internal transformation, others are directly focused on outward service and contribution. Lauren’s final project was to help make Berkeley a fair trade town. She said, “So I put those wheels in motion in August of 2009, when I got back from EOL. And we became a fair trade town in September of 2010.” This made Berkeley the 19th Fair Trade Town in the US.

Carol, in partnership with her significant other (an RDI permaculture graduate), used her EOL project to help her community at the local, neighborhood level. She said:
We basically converted our backyard into a small farm, we’ve got a veggie garden, got our compost in there . . . we did the project of redesigning our neighbor’s house across the street, who was also kind of interested in this sort of stuff . . . So two years ago we chipped her entire backyard . . . we are actually putting in some fruit trees this year.

We changed a couple of our other neighbors into chicken owners . . . three people on the street with hens now . . . And trying to like, slowly house by house, get together some sort of co—op. So. Spread out . . . on a very small scope, communities, and stuff like that.

Carol shared in Part Two that the sit spot was hard for her as she lives in an urban environment—however, through her service to her community, she is transforming her neighborhood into an urban permaculture oasis.

Jenna’s goals were international in scope. Her project goal was to help with cheetah conservation, by teaching Namibians to build beehives as a means for creating local economic sustainability and thereby to discourage poaching. A year after completing EOL, she and her partner Chris (who was also in EOL—10), are in Namibia. She sent in a picture for me to include in the dissertation, writing,

(This picture) is in the garden I’ve created at the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia. In less than 4 months, starting from scratch, we are now growing the bulk of the veggies to feed 20–30 people 3 times per day.

Figure 14.4 – Jenna in Namibia with the Cheetah Conservation Fund
Not only are Chris and Jenna building beehives with the locals, they are also teaching them to grow their own food and be self-sustaining.

These are just a few examples of the kinds of contributions that EOL graduates are making—there are many others that could be cited from throughout the years of the program and 15 EOL circles. The important message is that bringing these tools and practices into one’s home environment—be it in one’s relationship, family, work, or community—is the natural outcome of EOL’s model of integral transformation.

**Overall Transformations**

When asked about their overall experience of transformation as a result of EOL, participants had extremely moving things to share. Kyle said that it “changed his thinking about everything”:

I know I’m a lot more clear from when I started EOL. It really started shifting stuff. I was really starting to pay attention to my consciousness, to patterns that I created. I started to really look at my life, shining a light within me. You know, like, what’s real? I’m going to just face it. Okay, transparency, authenticity. It’s okay. I think there was that inner guidance of like acceptance that was really pronounced. We’re all doing our best. That attitude is so powerful. That’s just changed my thinking about everything.

Carl pointed to the program’s ability to help heal individual and collective wounds, and through that to learn to love oneself and the world:

The EOL program really has the potential to help people individually and also collectively as a group heal wounds that we may have been carrying around our whole lives. And through that find love in our hearts for ourselves. And be able to go out into the world and live that. Live love and love life.
Carle spoke about the total life transformation that happened for her at the end of EOL, describing it as a “forest fire” that at first burned everything up but then created the fertility for new growth to emerge:

My life sort of fell apart a little bit right after EOL…I felt like it was a forest fire. It was kind of like EOL—there was a lot of sparks, and then the forest fire happened and then there was nothing. And then the seeds started to come and all these little sprouts came and the soil was super fertile. And then my life just totally shifted. It was like I came out of something huge . . . just totally reinvested in myself. Started to do the things that really were right for me including remembering my spiritual path. I found amazing work that I’m super excited about. I started a women’s group and that was super empowering to birth that.

So yea, just a lot of other things have blossomed, even though there’s a lot of grief in that time where the forest fire came through . . . I mean the journey started a long time before EOL, but there was something sparking about EOL. It really asked me to move things around and take a look and see what’s no longer serving. So, yea it was kind of like the beginning of the end of a certain point in my life. I’ve just really become a different person now. It’s beautiful to see my path and see how far I’ve come and how much more I love myself and all the beautiful, amazing things I’ve brought into my life.

Carle’s story of letting go of who she had been to be reborn as “different person” is a classic example of the full transformative journey. On the outside, this looked like leaving a job to find one that she loves, leaving her relationship, rediscovering her spiritual path, claiming her voice as a singer, and starting a women’s circle—but all of this was rooted on the inside by coming to love and accept herself more deeply, which manifested as making choices that she knew were right for her path.

Susan also described a total life transformation, saying that although she couldn’t point exactly to the role that EOL had played, she had experienced a shift in many areas of her life:

It’s just so hard for me to say, “This is the role EOL played.” I can tell you that I’m really happy with where my life is right now in terms of career and community and relationships and who I am. And EOL played a really big part of that.
I know that I wouldn’t be who I am where I am without the program. . . . So yeah I’m just grateful. And I want you to know that it’s meaningful, powerful work that you guys are doing in the world. And it had a big impact on me, and continues to.

Being able to say that she is happy now with her life—with her career, community, relationships, and herself—indicates that although the EOL weekends may have felt intense for Susan, those changes are now integrated in a sustained and positive way.

Carol made a similar statement about how EOL has changed her, saying, “I’m definitely a different person coming out of it than I was when I went in. And I’m very grateful for that.”

Tim talked about how EOL opened up possibilities to imagine his life differently:

To me, what it opened up was an invitation to try on what it would feel like and a glimpse at what life could be like . . . you get a chance to really feel into wow, life could be like this. I could live in this kind of joy. I could have this kind of relationship with both the good and the bad, both what my strengths and my weaknesses. I could change my whole relationship and that could manifest in a very different way. You get a taste of it, you get some tools to help you, and there’s the invitation there. And that for me has been a really important launching point. The journey continues. And now I want to seek it out. I want to seek out relationships from folks that help me foster that. And I want to seek mentors that will help hold me in that, and look for learning opportunities to deepen that journey.

Acknowledging that the journey continues and that he intends to seek out mentors and opportunities to continue his learning reflects the ongoing nature of the transformative process catalyzed by EOL.

Regina spoke about how she continues to carry EOL with her, saying, “It is amazing what it’s like now to be walking with the program just in me, or the tools in me. It feels good.” Donna said that although she had participated in several other transformative programs, what she learned through EOL has been the most effectively retained: “The things that happened there, and the tools that I learned, definitely carried
forward in a much stronger way than anything else that I had done in my life.” Donna
described how it continues to evolve for her, saying, “This whole integration piece has
been amazing and continues and it’s like a spiral, it just keeps getting deeper and deeper.
And I love that. I love this journey.” As Donna indicates, when one integrates the
practices and tools into their daily life, the transformative effects of EOL continue when
the official program ends. She said, “I’m really grateful to continue it and not just finish
after 5 months when the workshop’s over. It’s the real deal.” This has led to a full
spectrum of life changes for Donna. When asked what had changed for her overall due to
EOL, she said,

   It’s almost the reverse for me to say what hasn’t changed for you. I can’t think of
   any part that hasn’t shifted. When you’re doing all that root work, all that soil
   work, how does it not shift the entire canopy, no matter where you are? Just
   having more consciousness about how I intend to show up. If I’m headed toward
   a meeting, if I’m with my mother-in-law, wherever I’m at . . . I get to choose how
   I’m going to show up. It’s changed everything. I don’t know that I can tell you all
   the ways, but I mean, when you start showing up authentically in every part of
   your life, every relationship has to shift, because you have shifted. Everything’s
different. It’s shinier; it’s brighter. It’s a lot more fun.

Donna’s statement evidences the integration of roots and soil work with changes in the
canopy, which are now giving her the freedom to design her life.

When asked if they had any final words or a testimonial to share, some of the
participants’ statements included the following:

   EOL is the best thing after ice cream. But I think it makes a real difference in
   your life and your attitude and you perspective about life and your leadership in
   the world. And how you are in the world. It makes a big difference.—Ericka

   I just have a lot of gratitude for this program and those holding it, the impact it’s
   had on my life. It’s definitely life changing and means a lot to impact so many
   other lives. The ripples that it’s had are huge. I’m really grateful.—Regina

   EOL is a complete experience. It’s as you’ve called it, it’s a secret sauce. You
can pick out the parts, I can tell you what they are and I can probably gauge
relative importance of those things, but it’s a cool program. And so, to show someone’s inspired to look at how they’re showing up in the world and where they might want to go, go do it. It’s a great program.—Jeff M

So for me EOL is like basic retooling. . . . I went to EOL and they said, well, if you really want a toolbox, you should put trigger tracking in it and you should put life mapping in it, and it’s probably good if you put creative scenes in it. And gratitude could also be a really good tool. And so that’s kind of how I feel about EOL. A toolbox for people who don’t have any tools.—Nalini

It’s a really powerful opportunity to be—to work your process in community—to witness by community. To be seen and heard and also it’s a really powerful support system if you’re feeling stuck. And there’s somewhere you’re wanting to go but you don’t know how to get there. This program will provide the support to help you navigate all the steps it takes to create the transformation that you’re wanting. And to create something that’s aligned with your heart and with spirit. With the larger consciousness of what’s unfolding.—Susan

These are only a sampling of the heartfelt testimonials that the interviewees shared, but they reflect the essence of many participants’ comments upon completion of the program.

In the next chapter, I will provide reflections on future pathways and directions for EOL, revisit the relational methodology, elucidate an “Ecology of Transformation,” and relate the findings of this dissertation in the context of the Great Turning.
CHAPTER 15: THE ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

In this final chapter, I address potential areas of growth for the Ecology of Leadership program, and suggest future directions for development. I revisit the concept of regenerative and relational research, and discuss the influence of this research on the case study community, as well as the overall implications of this pilot research method. I then discuss limitations of the research and areas for further study. I conclude by delineating a theory of the Ecology of Transformation, which includes a return to the context of the Great Turning and a discussion of the role of this work in the wider social, ecological, and spiritual transformation of our times.

The Ecology of Leadership—Areas for Growth

Diversity and Accessibility

The research revealed a few specific growth opportunities for EOL. The first regards inclusivity of people from more diverse ethnic, economic, and geographic locations. As stated at the beginning of the dissertation, the participants of the program tend to be relatively homogenous. While they do represent a wide range of age, background, and careers, they are primarily Caucasian, from a particular socio-economic group. The majority of EOL participants are not wealthy, but have high levels of education and social capital and are living lives of relative comfort and freedom. This indicates a barrier to entry of some kind for participants of diverse backgrounds. Therefore, a major growth opportunity is to increase participant diversity.
It was noted in the research, both through my own observations as well as in my interview with Ericka, that in order to include more low-income populations and people of color, EOL needs to have an outreach strategy and to consider the barriers to inclusion. In part through a suggestion from Ericka, RDI applied for a grant to support leadership training for young people of color. RDI received the grant, and EOL is now offering scholarships to young people of color to support their participation. This has increased diversity in the past few circles. However, as Ericka pointed out, it is also necessary to consider the setting of the program. For example, to reach the low-income population of downtown Oakland, would it be beneficial to offer an EOL in that area? This presents a potential dilemma, as part of the benefit of the program is offering participants a deep nature connection experience through the location at RDI. A program in downtown Oakland would need to be more creative about how to include the nature connection component. This is possible, however, through engaging some of the local settings such as Lake Merritt and the Oakland hills, as well as the emerging urban agriculture sites in the city. EOL did hold an introductory talk in Oakland at a grassroots youth cultural center before its last program, and was able to recruit a small group of participants of color from that presentation.

It was also noted by Ericka and by me that in order to have diverse participants, there needs to be more diversity in the facilitation team. She said that for example, to recruit African-American youth, “You need to have African Americans passing through the program and adapting it and becoming a facilitator. You have to, it doesn’t happen any other way.” The EOL leadership has recognized this, and is working to encourage participants of color to apply for the facilitation team.
The accessibility of the program is limited in part by the cost and location. As Carol stated, participants have to be able to afford the program, and need to be able to get to Bolinas either through ride share or having their own vehicle. As a relatively remote location, it’s not as accessible as if it were in the city or even online. The high ratio of female to male participants is also an area for growth. There has been an improvement since the first circles, but this ratio continues to be skewed toward women and reflects a larger trend within the field of transformative education.

Another factor is that EOL tends to attract people with relatively comparable worldviews. Deborah stated, “Right now EOL is basically catering to like-minded, eco-friendly permie (permaculture) types.” The question of how to make the program attractive and accessible to other more “mainstream” as well as more marginalized populations is an important one. Carol and Carl both discussed ways to make it more translatable in corporate settings, which I share in a later section. A dilemma that the EOL founders have frequently named is whether to plant the seed in the soil that is already fertile and ready, which means responding to the people who naturally feel called to participate in the program, or to try to penetrate more “hostile” or foreign environments by cultivating those soils or adapting the program. The strategy to date has been to focus on those that are ready—which is consistent with such theories as norm dynamics (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), popularized by Malcom Gladwell (2000) in *The Tipping Point*, which states that there are always early adopters who take on an emerging trend or technology before it builds to a tipping point, followed by mainstream acceptance. For example, eating “organic” food was once a fringe concept adopted by “eco-friendly” types—but now is relatively mainstream. Permaculture teachings
represent early adopters as “pioneer species” that push out first into challenging or
damaged ecosystems and prepare the soil for healthy biodiversity to emerge. In this
context, is it enough for EOL to be seeding change, circle after circle, with ready
participants who then go home to influence other environments, including their homes,
their communities, and the organizations they work in? Or should the program directly
target more diverse populations, including mainstream and corporate settings? This is
somewhat related to the issue of capacity, to be discussed in following sections.

**Financial Sustainability**

Another area of opportunity for EOL is its own financial sustainability. At the
moment, the program is offered at a relatively low cost compared to other similar
leadership programs and transformative workshops. Even so, most participants express
concern about the cost, and the majority are offered discounts and work trade
opportunities. Many are working in service-oriented careers or are self-employed, and
don’t have much disposable income. As a consequence there is financial pressure on the
program facilitators who must maintain employment in other capacities in order to
sustain themselves and support their work at EOL, which is currently on a part-time,
contract basis. This means that there is less time for further growth and expansion of the
program itself. A major growth edge for EOL is to determine the steps necessary to create
a financial model of self-sustainability which would incorporate a full time staff and
provide for its future development and expansion plans.
**Scaling**

At the moment, while extremely transformative for those who attend, EOL is only serving 60–70 participants a year. A valid point raised by Carl is that EOL needs to reach more people, including those outside of the already progressive Bay Area, in order to have a broader impact on social change. The challenge of increasing scale raises the concern of how to expand the program while maintaining its quality. As demonstrated in the research data, a large part of what makes the program transformative is the creation of a container in which people feel safe to be vulnerable and authentic. A major contributor to this is having extremely skillful facilitators who create a loving and supportive space. The idea of expansion therefore raises questions of size, format and facilitation. How big could each circle be? Could a program with 60 or 100 participants have the same intimate feeling and transformative effect? Regarding format, could the same quality of container be created through an online program or a book with study groups? And regarding facilitation, if the program was to expand or scale-up to exceed its current capacity, there is the issue of who would facilitate and how would the instructor/facilitators be trained? The question of how to transfer the teaching capacity to start other circles is thus a major question related to further scaling of the program.

**EOL for Corporate Environments**

Although there have been select corporate employees who have participated in EOL, and a sustainability consulting firm has sent several of its employees through the program, the corporate sector represents a huge untapped market for this work. Participants shared varying perspectives on the readiness of the corporate sector for EOL.
Carl felt that there could be a way to create a workshop that could be mandatory for corporate employees at places like Genentech, saying, “If you packaged it right, you could sell it to the corporations.” Deborah, who had a concern about EOL focusing too much on like-minded people, stressed the importance of “taking it into places where the leaders are making huge decisions around how the corporations are run and how they are impacting thousands of people’s lives.” Carol felt that it would be “invaluable,” but also that it would be very difficult, saying, “I honestly have a hard time imagining that a corporate level HR department would ever allow it to happen” because of the level of risk that could come “in a legal perspective of having employees divulging their deepest darkest secrets to each other.” Carol felt that it would be challenging or even potentially dangerous for people to be vulnerable or authentic in the corporate environment. This is one of the core challenges in existing models of leadership and is part of the paradigm that EOL is working to shift. Introducing EOL in more progressive corporations might help to popularize it and create an emerging movement towards more authentic and embodied models of leadership. However, there is also a danger of the program being co-opted in those settings, thereby reinforcing existing values rather than challenging systemic inequities.

**Future Directions for EOL**

A number of ideas for new directions and possibilities for EOL also emerged through the research. Some of those mentioned above include bringing EOL into corporations, creating an online version, and holding EOL circles in places that would increase accessibility and encourage other demographics to participate. Other ideas
include EOL for specific groups or with a particular focus—e.g. EOL for youth, EOL for couples, and EOL for regenerative relationships, such as within families or communities. Some participants suggested EOL publications and materials, such as a book. Carol had several suggestions for how to make a book accessible to the mainstream. For example, she suggested that since the group experience is so critical to EOL, that the book include instructions for how the group could create their own experience, and guidelines for things like “creating a safe container” that might be foreign concepts outside of the cultural context of the San Francisco Bay Area. Ericka suggested a calendar that would include pictures of the natural world and some sayings reflecting the nature connection metaphors, as well as places to remind people to do their core practices.

Carl mentioned the need for more ways for alumni to network and collaborate. He suggested creating a website, through which interest groups could be formed and serve as an incubator for people with similar goals to collaborate. Carl also proposed the idea of regional hubs, where alumni from across different circles who live in the same area could connect. Finally, an idea came forward from a few participants for EOL mixers as a means for EOL graduates who are single to meet other grads who would have similar practices and tools to bring to a relationship.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this research project is also a part of its design and benefit. From the beginning, this has been intended as a collaborative research project, in which I would be fully immersed in the community of study. I have assumed full subjectivity within this role, making my own experience central to the findings and the
story that has been shared here about the transformative power of EOL. I do not pretend to present an objective analysis of the Ecology of Leadership program, although this dissertation does include data from a variety of collection methods and has great rigor in terms of the longevity and depth of the on-site collaboration over the past three years. Nevertheless, some scholars may view how closely I am associated with the project as a limitation. From my perspective, my closeness of collaboration has been an essential component to conducting “relational” research and a natural process of being in a reciprocal relationship with the community being researched.

Other limitations include the fact that the participants are, as described above, relatively homogenous in ethnicity, culture and worldview. The research demonstrates that across the differences that do exist, participants consistently have transformative experiences in the program. The components of practices for inner and outer transformation, combined with reconnection to self, nature and the village, seem to be of value no matter who a participant is, or where he or she is in their life journey when they enter the program. What each person gets out of it depends largely on what they are bringing in, and where they want to go. However, it would be interesting to attempt to implement the program in different contexts—e.g. in downtown Oakland with low-income youth of color, or in a well-known corporation in Silicon Valley—to see whether the program is equally transformative, and/or if it would need to be adjusted dependent on the context. One could also argue that it is the context itself that makes it transformative—particularly its setting in a permaculture environment where participants can develop a deep connection with the land and also the more anonymous experience of joining a circle of strangers as opposed to doing the program with existing friends or
colleagues—therefore transferring it to another site would inherently produce different results.

As discussed in the methodology section, some of the measures that were part of the original research design were not implemented, or were carried out but the data not utilized in the presentation of the dissertation. The first of these is the 360 Landscape Assessment Survey. Although we collected 550 responses and conducted hundreds of hours of analysis, it was determined that the process, while useful for the participants’ transformative experience, was not relevant for the dissertation for the reasons described in Chapter Two. The intended alumni survey was also eliminated from the methods, which could be seen as a limitation in terms of reaching a wider breadth of participants. However, I had already reached a point of saturation in the data with the interviews and determined that to add more data would make the study unwieldy. In addition, the similarity of responses in the existing interviews indicated that to collect more data from alumni would result in further redundancy. A review of the program reflection documents, an evaluation completed by each participant at the end of each EOL circle (see Appendix Three), confirmed that the survey was unnecessary.

The greatest limitation of this study was my inability to record or document the program as it was happening. It was determined early on in the research design that to protect the safety of the container I would not be permitted to record or take notes on participants’ process during the circle time that takes place during the program weekends. This was essential to assure confidentiality, but given that some of the most transformative aspects of the program happened during the circle, there were many occasions when it would have been beneficial to capture that process as it was happening.
I am not sure if there would be an ethical way to do this in another study, so for now it stands as a limitation of this kind of research.

**Areas for Future Study**

One of the primary areas of interest that has surfaced for me through this study is the role of intergenerational and ancestral healing in facilitating transformative processes. This occurred as a consequence of my observation of the EOL circles and from my personal experience in engaging my own healing and transformation. Having been engaged in conscious transformative work for the past 20 years now, I am beginning to reach a point in my personal development where the exploration of my roots and soil is going deeper—I am extending beyond the experiences I have had in my lifetime into ancestral and collective root systems. For example, during the most recent EOL weekend, the men’s and women’s groups triggered deep nuggets in me which led to an experience of somatically re-living some of the traumas that my mother had experienced in her lifetime, including being pushed down a flight of stairs by her first husband and having had a miscarriage. With the support of the EOL village, it felt like I was reaching deep down into the soil of my ancestors, and releasing those nuggets which my mother did not have the support or capacity to release in her lifetime. This experience is evidenced in particular by Indigenous scholars who examine the role of collective and ancestral or “blood wounds” that are carried by populations today. Atkinson (2002) describes this as “transgenerational trauma,” or traumatic experience that is transmitted across generations (xi). This work is also explored by Diane Roberts, now Executive Director of urban ink, an Aboriginal theatre company in Vancouver, who developed The Personal Legacy
Project and the Arrivals Project, which evoke ancestral memory through embodied as well as archival exploration. This work is discussed in her chapter “The Lost Body: Recovering Memory—A Personal Legacy” in *Viva: Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas*, edited by Deborah Barndt (2011).

Whereas the majority of this study has focused on the experiences that individual participants had as related to their own lifetimes, it would be interesting to extend this work to looking at the intergenerational and ancestral traumas that we each carry. With the vast history of violence, colonization, abuse, and degradation that humanity holds in its collective body, I believe that we are going to have to become skillful at healing and releasing the collective nuggets in our human experience if we are to truly work toward the Great Turning and the creation of a peaceful, thriving world society. This is an area of study that may become critically valuable as we move forward. In terms of curriculum, it is an aspect that has not yet been consciously introduced in EOL, but through this research and my observations, will likely be more intentionally addressed in future iterations of the program.

A second area of study that I feel compelled by after completing this research relates to the dynamics of the masculine and feminine. This was a centrally transformative component of the program for many participants, even with an imbalanced ratio of male-female participants. It was in the women’s circles, not the mixed gender circles, that women felt safe enough to tell their deepest and most vulnerable stories. There is something in the collective experience of being female, or male, in our relationship with the other, and with these dynamics within ourselves, that is critical to the pathway forward. So many of the women shared similar stories of violence, abuse,
alcoholism, negative relationships with both their mothers and their fathers, and of overall pain in love, sexuality and relationships. We need only look at the statistics around divorce, failed relationships, and broken families, as well as those who stay together unhappily, to see that this is a major area of conflict affecting human life. Having experienced a divorce myself, I know this all too well. Sabine Lichtenfels (2012), founder of the Tamera peace research eco-village project, says, “There can not be peace in the world as long as there is war in love.” Lichtenfels is not the first to relate that the various forces of domination in the world—for example over the earth, over Indigenous peoples through colonization, through war, etc.—is in essence similar to the domination of the male over the female, or of the more powerful over the weak. I see balancing these male-female dynamics, in our relationships and within ourselves, and supporting the rise of the sacred masculine and feminine, as a central part of the research agenda of the Great Turning. This includes also a reexamination of the rigidity of definitions regarding gender, and a greater openness to a spectrum of gender identities.

A third area of research that would be interesting to pursue is to apply psychological and neuroscience research methodologies to the study of some of the practices utilized in EOL, such as gratitude, nature connection, and the effects of village life. Institutions such as the Institute of Noetic Sciences and the Center for the Greater Good at UC-Berkeley are using quantitative data collective and analysis to study practices such as meditation. It would be very interesting to invite one of these institutions to document what has been recorded here qualitatively to measure the benefits of the EOL practices. For example, what are the physiological changes that
participants experience as a consequence of a sit spot or a gratitude practice? This is not my personal area of research, but a collaboration in this area would be exciting.

A fourth area would be to explore a more explicit link to the work happening in EOL and to the Great Turning. My initial intention with this research as stated at the outset of this dissertation was to track the ways that this program was connected to the greater ecological, social, and spiritual shift of our times, and to map the role of RDI and EOL within the greater movement. It was identified early on that to extend the research out to this level of mapping the movement was a project beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is still an area that I am passionate about, and as I consider moving forward with EOL, something that I feel will be a valuable contribute to helping the organization to determine its next directions.

Finally, the way forward also includes exploring and envisioning new versions of the EOL program curriculum to meet the needs of diverse populations in different settings. It should be noted that the current EOL course is seen by the directors and founders as only a beginning—eventually it will likely be only one thread of the possible full set of offerings for the Ecology of Leadership. A full mind map has been developed which I will not share here for the sake of confidentiality, but which includes a diverse set of courses, including online courses, wilderness-based programming, EOL programs for young people, EOL for organizations, train the trainer courses, etc. A course that would include an explicit examination of the current global moment and embed this curriculum more overtly within the Great Turning as well as courses that take on a more direct social and environmental justice perspective could therefore be part of the future expansion of the program, both of which I would be inspired to help co-create.
Reconnective, Relational, Reciprocal, and Regenerative Research

Contributions to the EOL Program due to Research Collaboration

There have been several changes to the EOL program as a direct result of this research collaboration. The development and introduction of the 360° “Ecological Leadership Assessment,” as discussed in Chapter Two, was the first major curricular addition and had significant value for the participants. Some of the comments from participants included: “Thanks so much for doing this. It was empowering to just answer the questions because I see how much I have grown, and how much awareness I have of my life. It’s also clear to me what my opportunities for growth are.”; “Just the process of completing the various sections was a good exercise in developing self-awareness and goals.”; “Thank you for giving us this opportunity for self-examination, self-awareness and expansion.”; “I liked the assessment tool because it made me look at my self-growth process (or lack thereof) and helped give me direction as to how to approach the process.” Respondents also seemed to find value—some of the comments to this effect were: “These were awesome questions . . . makes me want to do the program! Wonderful to know people are doing this type of work. . . . Inspiring!”; “Great new tool—hope it becomes a regular thing and proves insightful and effective for all involved!”; and “Excellent and detailed survey. I learned a lot by doing it.”

While these participants indicate the value of the survey for giving them an opportunity for self-reflection, the most significant aspect of the process seemed to be receiving feedback from others. For many participants the idea of seeking feedback brought up a lot of fear, but for some it also brought powerful learning and insight. One
participant interviewed remarked that the 360° survey was the most valuable aspect of the EOL journey for her, because she sent the survey to a number of previous romantic partners who helped her to see some of her patterns in relationship that then led to her having a breakthrough. Another interviewee realized that he was judging himself much more critically than others: “One of my most powerful takeaways was realizing that people were seeing me for who I was even as I was trying to be something I wasn’t . . . it was like, wow. These are the words that I longed to hear people to say, that I think I’m 10 years away from. No, it’s happening right now. To me, it was very useful.” (Tim) He reported that the survey thus enabled him to release some of his self-critic and step more into his authenticity. Personally, I participated in the survey and received twelve responses from various family members and friends, which contained helpful reflections and information about both areas for growth as well as existing strengths.

The idea for the pods, or small groups, which emerged out of my interview with Jill, as discussed in Chapter Six, has been particularly impactful, providing participants with an additional layer of support throughout the program and giving the facilitation alumni a greater opportunity to exercise their leadership and coaching skills. There have been numerous additional changes to the program during the past three years, based in part on my research findings, such as including more nature connection time, more movement and embodied activities, and the incorporation of more diverse ways of teaching.

The fact that I have joined the core instruction team has also been a direct outcome of my collaboration, and according to participants has added a critical aspect of
feminine leadership within the program. For example, one participant said, “I love your balancing feminine energy Katia—caring, nurturing, curious.” Another said,

I appreciate Katia for the model she offers for being a multidimensional woman: mother, teacher, healer, facilitator, giver. In so many ways Katia offered so much caring . . . calling to check in and offer support. She also offers skillful wisdom and insight, and so much love.

In addition to my contributions as a facilitator, I have also been a central part of the organization’s conversations about the future of the program and how it is developing, and will continue to be a part of this dialogue after this dissertation is complete. Current directions that we are considering and that I see myself being involved in include taking this work to a much larger audience, and helping connect the work of the Regenerative Design Institute more explicitly to the Great Turning and to other pioneering models for regenerative culture and leadership around the world.

A New Paradigm for Research

At the outset of this dissertation, I stated my intentions for this research project to be re-connective, relational, reciprocal, and regenerative. Through the process of conducting this research over the past three years, I have reconnected more deeply with myself, with the natural world, and with community. The relational component of this study became one of the most important aspects of the research—the work has been based on a profoundly collaborative relational structure, and I have developed relationships that will last a lifetime. There has been a constant stream of reciprocity—in which I have been giving to and receiving from the community of EOL on an ongoing basis. And it has certainly been regenerative—I am completing the dissertation feeling that I have more energy, resources and abundance in my life as a result of the research
than before. I have literally been regenerated—created anew and transformed—through the process.

One of the primary contributions of this research project may be the innovation of the ideas of “relational research” and “regenerative research.” Relational research is not an entirely new concept—as discussed in the methodology section, it draws upon the paradigms of Indigenous methodologies as well as other community-based methods of research (e.g. Smith, L.T., 1999; Rigney, 1999; Bishop, 1999; Wilson, 2001, 2008). However, I believe that the term relational could form an overarching framework for a new paradigm of research, beyond the post-modern. This relational approach places relationships at the core of the research design and methodology— not only amongst humans but also with all beings—and thus forms an appropriate foundation for research conducted in a more ecological and systems-based worldview, in this time of the Great Turning.

The idea that research and scholarship could be regenerative is also revolutionary. Beyond the cubicle, beyond the lone researcher behind a computer desk, regenerative research proposes that scholarship can be life-affirming and re-connective. In this model, both the scholar and the subjects are renewed and rejuvenated through the process. Again, this is not an entirely new practice—other existing models of research, such as participatory research, participatory action research, community-engaged and arts-based research are all also potentially regenerative. However, more could be written and documented about how these models of research differ from more traditional academic forms as relates specifically to this quality of regeneration of both the scholar and the community of research. I see this as an important additional area for further scholarship,
writing and research that I intend to pursue. An interesting dimension to research within this field would be whether the concept of regenerative and relational research could apply outside of research contexts that are intended as explicitly transformative or Indigenous. My hypothesis is that a regenerative and relational framework could be brought to any context, and that in fact this shift could critically influence a new direction for academia. Given that the overarching principle of a relational framework is the recognition that everything is interrelated, in this context, all fields—no matter what the subject—fall under a context of relationality. If this were to be acknowledged, both in terms of the inherent relationships between the disciplines as well as the relationship with the subjects of research within each field, it would create a foundation for a more holistic understanding of knowledge and for more cooperation. The trend toward more interdisciplinary collaboration and systems thinking to solve problems is evidence of the readiness of some scholars to move toward a more relationship-based epistemology.

The suggestion of approaching all academics from a regenerative standpoint could be revolutionary, but I would suggest that there desperate need for academics to become more regenerative—both for individual academics themselves, no matter what the discipline, as well as in the contribution of the scholarship itself. This may even more true in less socially-oriented fields in which isolation or dynamics of competition are more the norm. Remembering back to Michael Lerner’s assertion that the deepest longing that humans have is to feel they are contributing to the world (2000), framing research as a means for regenerating the world could lend meaning and purpose to scholarship, no matter what the topic of study. It is self-evident that to apply a relational framework to a non-progressive field of study would in and of itself be transformative.
The Ecology of Transformation

So what becomes possible when participants source their inner healing and outer action and leadership from a deep connection with themselves, nature, and the village? In Chapter One, I described the central challenge of our times as a personal and collective “disconnect disorder,” in which humans are experiencing disconnection on a deep level from their own inner selves, from nature, from one another, and from a sense of meaning and purpose in the world. Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated the ways in which the Ecology of Leadership, as one transformative educational program for adults, holistically addresses this disconnect disorder. What distinguishes the Ecology of Leadership is that rather than focusing on an isolated aspect of the human experience—e.g. self development, nature connection, group process, or leadership—it combines all of these in a supportive, loving, and intentional context. Together, this unique combination of elements—the simultaneous treatment of the inner and outer aspects of the human being while engaging practices for deep reconnection with oneself, the natural world, and with others—is what creates the particular alchemy that defines the core transformative model of this work. I term this model the “Ecology of Transformation.” Figure 15.1 represents this model, through the
joining of the roots and soil and the canopy (the inner and outer process) within a framework of reconnection with self, nature, village, and the world. In the next sections I will discuss a few more components of this framework for transformation.

**An Iterative Process of Transformation**

It is important to note that although this dissertation has been laid out in a somewhat linear fashion—of going to the roots and soil first and then into the canopy, and of connection with self, then nature, then village—in reality the Ecology of Transformation is a fluid and constantly iterative process. As our branches grow taller, our roots simultaneously need to dig deeper—and vice versa. Therefore as one creates and reaches out into the world, he or she simultaneously needs to continue the inner healing and transformation work. Likewise, the process of connecting with the self, with the natural world, and with the village is a fluid, ongoing, and overlapping process. The model of the Ecology of Transformation presented above is thus just a basic representation of these interlocking dynamics—it could also be drawn as a web, a spiral, or concentric circles in which the self is nested within the village which is within the natural world. The important aspect is that all of these different layers of connection need to be involved in a holistic and integral model of transformation.

**Change at Nature’s Pace**

EOL does not suggest that transformation will happen quickly. In contrast, the EOL process follows more of a natural world metaphor. Sometimes change happens instantaneously. More often than not, as stated by Mandela, it is slow and incremental.
One of the tools introduced in EOL is the idea of the “three foot toss”—that very achievable, small first step that one can make towards change. No matter how big, or seemingly insurmountable, there is always a three-foot toss which is the first step towards a goal.

Susan spoke about her journey of transformation as a slow process of learning to listen deeply:

It continues to be one little piece at a time . . . there were these little “a-ha” moments of like “okay well maybe I don’t need to push so hard. . . .” It was a long period of, you know, sitting with myself and really listening for what needs to come forward.

Elyse noted upon arriving at the end of the program that it was really just the beginning:

Being able to look back, I realize that there isn’t like a final thing, that this is just the start of a path that we’re choosing. That there’s still some things I want to work out that are going to take some time. And maybe they can’t be fixed in 5 months, and that’s okay. I’m starting to put that energy into kind of trying to figure them out. . . . Not quite sure where I’m going, but if I can feel comfortable with me, then it’s okay wherever you go.

Whereas some participants did experience miraculous, sudden transformations—for example, my story of finding my new home within twenty-four hours—most changes take time. I initially believed my final EOL project to be this dissertation. Five programs later, I am now just completing the first draft. This is much longer than I anticipated—but I now see that it has followed the perfect natural cycle of unfolding. As is frequently revealed in EOL participants’ final project presentation, the journey itself becomes much more important than the destination or goal itself.
**Slow Change and the Great Turning**

There is a tension between this slow model of transformation and the desire to change both ourselves and the world more quickly. In times like these, it is good to return to Rumi’s Field and remember the following quote by Brian Swimme (2011):

This is the greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: You take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone for 14 billion years, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans.

This does not mean that we should not work toward major transformation and change—with current environmental crises such as climate change, ongoing states of war, violence, poverty, and injustice around the world, the global situation is indeed calling for urgent attention. However, the question that is posed centrally in EOL is not necessarily how to speed up what we are doing, but as stated famously by Gandhi, rather how to “be the change” and fully embody the transformation that we want to see, from the inside out.

Or as framed by Carl,

John Francis who walked around the world and didn’t get into a car for 22 years and didn’t speak or use his voice for 17 years, he summed it up by saying “how we greet people how we first meet them, that’s the first step.” . . . And he was talking about the environmental woes of our world and so that really opened my eyes. . . . I think EOL does a really good job of helping us get to that point where we can receive people in a helpful and loving way.

Jeff Z. spoke powerfully about the concept that the foundation for changing the world is changing oneself:

One of my earliest mentor figures once said that the grandest visions are always of the self. It was Tom Brown’s mentor . . . Tom came back from his first vision quest. He was like, “I didn’t see any spirits. I didn’t turn into an eagle and fly away.” His grandfather was like the grandest visions are always of the self; you have to start there. And so, that’s sort of how EOL has always helped me. Right, of course. I can’t really help the world become a better place, without helping myself become a better person.
Jeff went on to say that he is exemplifying this in his own life after EOL:

The last thing I would say is just . . . it’s almost like this viral thing. It gets into your language. It gets into the way you interact with the world as a whole in this really beautiful way. So many more smiles at the cash register. So many more moments that you know that the person you just walked by and had some tiny little interaction with is having a better day. And that I think is really the result of feeling as though I have a little more permission to let some of that light out. Share a little bit more of that light with people around me, even just people that I have never met before and will never meet again. That’s just the best thing ever. To see someone smile because you smiled at them and know that their day just got a little bit better. I love that.

In its essence, this is the objective of EOL—to support individuals to shine more of their light into the world. Jeff’s description of this influence rippling out, person by person, is a beautiful representation of how the EOL work is transforming the world, one interaction at a time, like the butterfly effect.

*The Journey to Remembrance*

At its core, this dissertation is about the deepest possible transformation of all—the journey from feelings of disconnection, isolation, fear, inadequacy, and shame to a state of connection, remembrance, trust, wholeness, and love. This transformation is at the core of the work of the Ecology of Leadership, it is central to my own personal process over the past three years, and I would argue that it is at the heart of the shift that is needed for the Great Turning. No matter what the context—in one’s personal life, in our relationships, in our work, or in our service path in the world—this transformation is asking us time and time again to move from an isolated, disconnected, solitary, competitive worldview and way of being into one that is collective, connected, collaborative, and co-creative.
This capacity to recognize our own “disconnect disorder” within, and to transform it to connection and wholeness is part of the healing of our world. Kahane (2010) writes,

Our capacity to address our toughest social challenges depends on our willingness to admit that we are part of, rather than apart from, the woundedness of our world. (p. 132)

Kahane further addresses the question of fear, saying that this is what holds us back from fully exercising our power and love:

What holds us back from exercising all of our power and all of our love? Fear. Because we are afraid of offending or hurting others, we hold back our purposefulness and our power. Because we are afraid of being embarrassed or hurt, we hold back our openness and our love. We dysfunctionally allow our fears to prevent us from becoming whole. (p. 132)

This capacity, to open our hearts and remember our wholeness within ourselves and in relationship with all beings, is what will ultimately contribute to the Great Turning, and make the connection between the personal transformation and the greater social, political, ecological, and spiritual shift that is needed for humanity to transition to a life-sustaining society. Michael Lerner (2000) encapsulates my feeling of what is needed for these times in the following statement in *Spirit Matters*:

This is a wonderful moment to be alive. We can already begin to see the outlines of a new consciousness that is spreading throughout the world. Nothing is more contagious than genuine love and genuine caring. Nothing is more exhilarating than authentic awe and wonder. Nothing is more hopeful than a genuine reorientation towards Nature. Nothing is more exciting than to witness people having the courage to fight for their joyful service to others. (p. 330)

The transformations that individuals experience through the Ecology of Leadership are a part of this new consciousness that is spreading throughout the world. My story is one small example—and yet, as I have written throughout this dissertation, in three years, my life has changed dramatically as a result of my association with EOL. The EOL program may only be catalyzing this change for a few individuals at a time, but as Hawken
describes in *Blessed Unrest*, each of these changemakers that enter the system forms a node that like mushroom mycelium, together create an underground web that is transforming the whole planet. As each individual changes, so does their own personal ecology of relationships—and so does the world. It is an ecological model for transformation. This is the new model of revolution—an ecological revolution—a mycelial revolution—that is not about overthrowing power or fighting against it— but rather a transformation from the inside out. As the roots and soil of the human collective transform, so will our canopy. And therefore the Great Turning may in fact be a Great Transformation—a Great Regeneration, that happens through a natural process of bioremediation, infused with nutrients of love and curiosity and supported by deep connections with ourselves, with the natural world, and with the village.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW SCRIPT

–Gratitude
–Intentions
–Overview of process

Connecting to the journey..
1. Take a moment and go back to the time before you started EOL—what was your life like? What was going on? What was the experience of your life like? If you were describe your state of mind or state of heart, what would it be? Connect to it, not in a cerebral way—connect to it viscerally. Take a moment to connect back.
2. At that time in your life, why did it make sense for you to do EOL? What was calling you into that journey? Why did it seem worth it, given all of the other things you could have done—all of the ways that you could have spent your energy, time and resources.

3. Now we’re going to ask you about the EOL journey, and some things that stood out for you, and we’re going to break down into some specific areas. So we’d like to invite you to take a few minutes again to connect to the journey… (couple of minutes for silence or journaling—see what bubbles up—like an EOL exercise—gives them a little bit of time before they share)…

Awakening
4. Generally, as you do an overarching sweep of your experience in EOL, does anything stand out as a major “aha” moment for you? Are there any ways in which you felt like your consciousness, awareness, experience or understanding of yourself and the world shifted? A shift in your meaning perspective? If you had major shifts/breakthrough/insights/epiphanies, what were they?

Connecting
Connection to Self/Inner gardening
5. Did EOL How did EOL support you in connecting to and transforming elements of your inner world?
6. Would you like to share any transformations that took place in your roots & soil during EOL?
7. How have these transformations influenced the way you show up in your life and your service?

Connection to the Land/Nature/Earth
8. What role did nature connection play in your transformative journey through EOL?
9. Can you share a specific example where something opened up for you through your nature connection practice?

Connection to others/community
10. What role did the EOL circle play in your experience during and after the program?
11. How did it support your growth? What was unique and powerful about that?
12. What was the role of the buddy relationship in supporting your growth?
13. Did your circle continue to connect following the completion of the official program?
14. In what ways is your EOL community still alive in your life today?

**Cultivating capacity**
15. What tools or practices or routines were most helpful for you on your path?
16. Did you develop any skills or capacities through EOL which you did not have before?
17. Was there a particular alchemy or combination of practices that you found most beneficial for you personally?
18. Which of the EOL tools, practices, routines, etc do you find your self drawing on and consciously using in your life?

**Engaging**

*Engaging your learning in the world (leadership/service/designing your life)*
19. Have you made any changes in your life that were inspired or made more possible through EOL? Please give us specific examples in the following areas:
   -- Your work, career, or service path/your contributions in the world?
   -- Your personal life? Your relationships? Your family?
20. At what point in the journey did you feel like the changes really started to sink in? During the program? After?
21. What is the pattern of continued transformation since leaving the program?
22. How has it impacted your ability to manifest what you want?

**Creative Scenes**
23. Did you bring your creative scenes? Is there one that you would be willing to share & talk a little about?

**FINAL QUESTIONS:**
24. Was there anything surprising that or unexpected that happened for you through the EOL experience?
25. What are you most thankful for around your EOL journey?
26. If you were recommending the program to a friend, what would you tell them about it?
27. Is there anything else that you’d like to tell us/is there anything that we didn’t cover that feels important?
28. How do you feel that the essential elements of EOL could be transferred to a program that is virtual?
29. What do you see as expanded areas of possibility for EOL? Is there anything that you would be excited to participate in?
30. Where do you see EOL/RDI in the greater context of offerings that are supporting the great turning?

Any other questions for us?
APPENDIX TWO: EOL FINAL PROGRAM REFLECTION DOCUMENT

Reflections as we close the chapter          Your Name:

1. How did you hear about EOL in the first place?

2. What were the biggest challenges in getting to “yes” before committing to the EOL journey?

3. When you signed up, what needs did you feel EOL would satisfy?

4. Describe the main benefits you received.
   • Think back to the time you joined the Ecology of Leadership Circle. What has opened up for you or shifted in your life—in the trunk and branches of your tree—since that time?
   • What has shifted on the inside—in your root system, your ways of being, how you feel and think and where you are sourcing from—since then?
   • What changes have you noticed in your leadership?

5. What specific aspects of the program have been most valuable to you?

6. How did the buddy system support your journey and how could the buddy system be improved?

7. How did the presence of alumni impact your experience of the program, and what roles do you see they could play to contribute further?

8. How do you feel we could improve the program for future EOL circle members?
   a. What would you like to see more of and what do you feel could be de-emphasized?
   b. What do you feel was/is missing?

9. Please provide some specific feedback to James and Christopher on their facilitation of the program—strengths/gifts and/or opportunities for growth/improvement.

   For James:
   For Christopher:

10. Briefly describe your project, what you learned about yourself in the process, and how the project impacted your leadership development.
11. What was most challenging about being part of EOL?

12. What kind of program offering would support you in the next steps of your continuing development as a leader and being?

13. How would you envision a summer weekend EOL gathering supporting you on your journey, and what would be the major elements of that weekend summer camp?

14. In addition to your leadership circle relationships, a personal coaching alliance can be a powerful avenue to enrich the journey into your creative scenes. Many EOL participants have gotten a lot of value from integrating coaching into their ecology to deepen their learning and support next steps after graduation. Take a few moments to reflect on how coaching could support YOU. If you’re not sure, but would like to explore it more for yourself, just say so below, and we can be in touch.

   a. Are you interested in learning more about—and exploring—a coaching relationship for yourself?
   b. How could coaching support your next steps following graduation?

15. Please describe any other kinds of support you feel would feel helpful (i.e. group calls, regional gatherings, buddies, EOL parties, advanced EOL programs, seminars on specific topics, etc):

16. In what other contexts do you think this program would find fertile soil (specific groups, communities, organizations, or other demographics, etc)?

17. Would you recommend the program to others, and would you be willing to invite people you know to come to a program introduction in the future?

18. What would you tell others who are considering taking this course?

19. How about a short and sweet nugget testimonial we might use to share the possibility with others?

20. What is your overall evaluation of the EOL program? (5 point scale: 1=poor, 5=excellent).
APPENDIX THREE: 360° SURVEY

360° Ecological Leadership Assessment Survey—EOL Participants’ Self-Assessment

Welcome!
Thank you for taking part in the Ecological Leadership Assessment survey. This survey is a new tool that is being incorporated in the Regenerative Design Institute’s Ecology of Leadership (EOL) program.

The intention of the survey is to help you gain a “360” or global picture of different aspects of your current leadership abilities. By asking individuals who represent different relationships in your life (e.g. work colleague, family member, friend, partner, community member, etc.), we hope you will gain a rounded-out perspective of your current capacities, strengths, and areas for growth. You will then be able to identify one or two areas of growth opportunity to focus on throughout your participation in the EOL program. We are asking you to each fill out the survey for yourself, so that you can compare your own self-assessment with how you are seen by others. We will have a similar assessment at the end of the EOL program to assess your growth throughout the program, and again six months later to see where you are at that time.

You will note as you proceed through the survey that there are ten primary categories, and several questions which fall under each category that assess different aspects of that leadership area. We realize that surveys are limited in their scope, and that some questions may be difficult to answer. Whenever possible, please choose the answer that feels most true. Please respond as honestly and authentically as possible. If you feel unable to answer a question, simply check “N/A.”

Please find a time that you can complete the survey all at once, as you will not be able to come back and finish it later if you have to stop once you get started. We anticipate that it will take roughly 30 minutes to complete.

This survey has been designed by the Co-Directors of the Ecology of Leadership Program in collaboration with Katia Madjidi as part of her PhD research project, which is helping to assess the Ecology of Leadership program’s effectiveness in the area of transformative education. We hope to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of EOL through visual graphs charting participants’ growth in leadership capacity throughout their participation in the program. In this regard, we request your permission to use the data results from this research project and for any resulting publications, including an intended book on the Ecology of Leadership. Please note that if your data is used, it will remain completely anonymous unless you would like to be identified by name.

James Stark
Co-Director, Ecology of Leadership Program
james@regenerativedesign.org

Christopher Kuntzsch
Co-Director, Ecology of Leadership Program
cmk@christopherkuntzsch.com

Katia Madjidi
Co-Investigator and PhD Candidate
OISE–University of Toronto
17 Wilkie Crescent, Guelph, ON, N1L0B1, Canada
519-803-3353 (m)
katiardi@gmail.com

Dr. Jean-Paul Restoule, Research Supervisor and Professor of Adult Education and Community Development
OISE–University of Toronto
252 Bloor St West
Toronto, ON M5S1V6
Survey Respondent Contact Information:

Name

Address

Phone

Email

I have read the above information letter, and consent to participate in this study.

Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

SURVEY

To the best of your ability, please answer the following questions on the following scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<th>Neutral</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</table>

Curiosity, Wonder, Deep Listening
1. I seek out learning and growth opportunities
2. I am adaptable and flexible in situations that are dynamic and changing
3. I bring a spirit of wonder into my interactions with others and the world
4. I welcome life experiences—including successes & challenges—as learning opportunities
5. I practice curiosity and deep listening in one-on-one interactions
6. I practice curiosity and deep listening in my community
7. I practice curiosity and deep listening in my workplace
8. I practice curiosity and deep listening in my family
9. I listen to my own inner knowing / intuition
10. I honor/act upon my own inner knowing / intuition

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sourcing from the Heart, Loving & Compassion**
- I demonstrate vulnerability in personal interactions
- I demonstrate vulnerability in professional interactions
- I demonstrate vulnerability in group/team interactions
- I help create safe space for others to be vulnerable
- I am compassionate and empathetic with others
- In general, I feel a strong sense of love for myself and for others
- I approach interactions with love
- I consistently approach situations with kindness
- I am generous in sharing my resources (i.e. abundance of food, money, time, attention, knowledge, connections, etc.)
- I source from the heart in my leadership

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

**Cultivating the Inner World**
- I am aware of my own strengths/capacities
- I am aware of my main challenges/growth opportunities
- I take responsibility and ownership for my own experience / triggers—rather than blaming others
- I demonstrate awareness of my own patterns (of thought, emotion, belief, and behavior)
- I seek out opportunities to transform those patterns that don’t serve me
- I have personal practices / core routines (such as meditation, time in nature, journaling, yoga, prayer, movement, etc.) that support me in my self-development
- I consistently challenge myself to be fully alive, live on my edge, and live into my full potential
- I practice self-loving and self-forgiveness
- I practice forgiveness with others
- I embody patience in my own life and in dealings with others
- I embody peacefulness in my own life and in dealings with others
- I feel grounded and at home in myself and the world
- I value and cultivate a deepening relationship with nature
- I am proactive and courageous in seeking out ways to grow and heal

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?
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</table>

**Integrity/Commitment/Congruence**

a. My actions align with my words  
b. My actions align with my values  
c. My actions align with the visions I carry for myself and the world  
d. I am authentic in my communication and engagements with others  
e. I am truthful  
f. I am trustworthy  
g. I reflect before making commitments to ensure it is a commitment I am likely to follow through on  
h. I consistently follow through on my commitments  
i. I am open and transparent in my actions and communication  
j. I live with integrity

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

**Radiance/Joy/Passion/Illumination Factor**

a. I am radiant and “lit up” in my life in general  
b. I am radiant and “lit up” in my work/service path  
c. I am radiant and “lit up” when I am with my family  
d. I am radiant and “lit up” in my primary relationships (intimate partner, friends, mentors, etc.)  
e. I am radiant and “lit up” in community (could be community events, extracurricular activities, gatherings, etc.)  
f. I live life joyfully  
g. I am playful  
h. I incorporate humor in my leadership and interactions with others  
i. My life is full of magic and synchronicity  
j. I embrace and cultivate creativity in my life and service in the world  
k. I cultivate and practice gratitude  
l. I feel deeply connected to a sense of inner joy and radiance

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

**Other Leadership and Management Competencies**

ii. I consistently achieve what I intend/set forth to accomplish  
iii. I create conditions that help others bring forward their leadership and contribute their unique gifts
iv. I effectively adjust my leadership style to match what is most needed depending on who is involved and what specific tasks/outcomes are to be achieved.

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v. I delegate tasks/objectives/projects to people in ways that maximize the chances for success.

vi. I am consistently clear in my communication with others.

vii. I approach emotionally charged conversations and situations with courage and skill and am able to help achieve breakthroughs and resolution.

viii. I demonstrate strong organizational skills.

ix. I consistently honor time commitments (am punctual, communicate and renegotiate when challenges arise, etc.)

x. I am reliable.

xi. I am confident in my abilities and leadership.

xii. I take a strong stand and am decisive when such an approach is needed.

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

Possibility/Vision/Intention

ii. I move towards what’s possible rather than being constrained by my limiting beliefs or the past.

iii. I am consistently exploring what’s possible in my relationships with others.

iv. I have a vision for what I want to create in the world.

v. I have a vision for where I am going in my own life.

vi. I inspire others to support/join me in working towards shared visions.

vii. I lead from a place of courage and love rather than fear or negativity.

viii. I am able to see solutions and move towards them.

ix. I use milestones, strategies, and action plans to walk towards my vision.

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

Contribution, Co-Creation, Collaboration, the Collective

a. I demonstrate commitment to making a contribution in the world.

b. I consider others in my leadership rather than simply myself.

c. I am collaborative & co-creative in my leadership.

d. I have an ability to connect with a diversity of people.

e. I am able to unite and mobilize people with differing points of view.

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?
Strongly Disagree  Disagree a little  Neutral  Agree a little  Strongly Agree
1  2  3  4  5

The Wider Landscape
a. I am aware of large-scale patterns and socio-economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual issues of our time
b. I am inspired by and excited about the possibilities for creating a more environmentally sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilling world
c. I am committed to and actively participating in creating a more environmentally sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilling world
d. I am actively involved in environmental initiatives
e. I am actively involved in social justice initiatives
f. I am actively involved in spiritual initiatives
g. I make personal choices that demonstrate my understanding and commitment to environmental sustainability and global justice (considering where their goods and services are sourced, what transportation mode to choose, what food to eat)

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

Balance & Integration
a. I balance self-care with taking care of others
b. I integrate life’s learning opportunities from the past to inform choices for my present and future
c. I move with grace and ease
d. I make choices in consideration of both short-term and long-term outcomes
e. I balance my emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental dimensions
f. I enjoy balance between my work life, family, intimate relationships, friendships, and community engagements

Are there any comments or notes that you want to make about this area of your own self-development at this time?

Additional Qualitative Text Box Questions:
ii. What are your core strengths?
iii. What are your natural gifts?

3. What lights you up the most?

4. What are your main challenges?

5. Where do you feel stuck?
Welcome!
Thank you for considering taking part in the Ecological Leadership Assessment survey. This survey is a new tool that is being incorporated in the Regenerative Design Institute’s Ecology of Leadership (EOL) program. You are receiving this survey as you have been identified by a current EOL participant as someone who could help provide valuable insight that will support them in their leadership development journey.

The intention of the survey is to help the EOL participants to gain a “360” picture of different aspects of their current leadership abilities. By asking individuals who represent different relationships in their life (e.g. work colleague, family member, friend, partner, community member, etc.), the participants will gain a rounded-out perspective of their current capacities, strengths, and areas for growth. They will then be able to identify one or two areas of growth opportunity to focus on throughout their participation in our program. We are also asking the participants to each fill out the survey for themselves, so that they can compare their own self-assessment with how they are seen by others. We will have a similar assessment at the end of the EOL program to assess their growth throughout the program, and again six months later to see where they are at that time.

You will note as you proceed through the survey that there are ten primary categories, and several questions which fall under each category that assess different aspects of that leadership area. We realize that surveys are limited in their scope, and that some questions may be difficult to answer. Whenever possible, please choose the answer that feels most true. Please respond as honestly and authentically as possible, as the participant needs your clear feedback in order to assess their strengths and growth opportunities accurately. If you feel unable to answer a question based on your experience with the individual, simply check “N/A.”

Please find a time that you can complete the survey all at once, as you will not be able to come back and finish it later if you have to stop once you get started. We anticipate that it will take roughly 30 minutes to complete.

This survey is completely voluntary and anonymous. Please note that the participant will NOT know your identity—they will merely receive their numerical results for each quantitative question and overall area, and an aggregation of the qualitative response sections. They will not know who has answered which survey or provided which answers.

You are asked to provide your contact information so that we can contact you to complete the follow-up surveys, however your information will be held as strictly confidential and will *not* be released to the participant in question.

This survey has been designed by the Co-Directors of the Ecology of Leadership Program in collaboration with Katia Madjidi, a PhD student who is helping to assess the Ecology of Leadership program’s effectiveness in the area of transformative education. We hope to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of EOL through visual graphs charting participants’ growth in leadership capacity through their participation in the program. In this regard, we request your permission to use the data results for this research project and for any resulting publications, including an intended book on the Ecology of Leadership. Again, if your data is used, it will remain completely anonymous. The participant will also need to consent to sharing their data results if used in this way, and we will be approaching them separately about this.

Thank you for considering participating in our survey. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact any of the following parties:
James Stark  
Co-Director, Ecology of Leadership Program  
james@regenerativedesign.org

Christopher Kuntzsch  
Co-Director, Ecology of Leadership Program  
cmk@christopherkuntzsch.com

Katia Madjidi  
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Jean-Paul Restoule, Research Supervisor and Professor of Adult Education and Community Development  
OISE-University of Toronto  
252 Bloor St West  
Toronto, ON M5S1V6  
jeanpaul.restoule@utoronto.ca (416) 978-0806

Survey Respondent Contact Information:

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Name

Participant for whom you are completing the survey

Relationship to Participant

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Address

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Phone

Email

I have read the above information letter, and consent to participate in this study.

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Signature ___________________________ Date ____________
SURVEY

To the best of your ability, please answer the following questions about (participant name) on the following scale. For questions you feel unable to fairly assess, please answer N/A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree a little</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Curiosity, Wonder, Deep Listening**

1. ________ seeks out learning and growth opportunities for her/himself
2. ________ is adaptable and flexible in situations that are dynamic and changing
3. ________ brings a spirit of wonder into interactions with others and the world
4. ________ welcomes life experiences—including successes & challenges—as learning opportunities
5. ________ practices curiosity and deep listening in one-on-one interactions
6. ________ practices curiosity and deep listening in her/his community
7. ________ practices curiosity and deep listening in her/his workplace
8. ________ practices curiosity and deep listening in regards to her/his family
9. ________ listens to his/her own inner knowing / intuition
10. ________ honors and acts upon his or her own inner knowing / intuition

Would you like to add anything that would help describe (participant name)’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **Curiosity, Wonder and Deep Listening**? (open text box for qualitative response)

---

**Sourcing from the Heart, Loving & Compassion**

1. ________ demonstrates vulnerability in personal interactions
2. ________ demonstrates vulnerability in professional interactions
3. ________ demonstrates vulnerability in group/team interactions
4. ________ helps create safe space for others to be vulnerable
5. ________ is compassionate and empathetic with others
6. ________ seems to feel a strong sense of love for his/herself and for others
7. ________ approaches interactions with love
8. ________ consistently approaches situations with kindness
9. ________ is generous in sharing their resources (i.e. abundance of food, money, time, attention, knowledge, connections, etc.)
10. ________ sources from the heart in his/her leadership

Would you like to add anything that would help describe (participant name)’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **Sourcing from the Heart, Loving & Compassion**? (open text box for qualitative response)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>n/a</td>
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</table>
## Cultivating the Inner World

1. __________ is aware of his/her own strengths/capacities
2. __________ is aware of his/her main challenges/growth opportunities
3. __________ takes responsibility and ownership for his/her own triggers—rather than blaming others
4. __________ demonstrates awareness of his/her own patterns (of thought, emotion, belief, and behavior)
5. __________ seeks opportunities to transform those patterns that don’t serve him/her
6. __________ has—and regularly engages—personal practices / core routines (such as meditation, time in nature, journaling, yoga, prayer, movement, etc.) that support him/her in his/her self-development
7. __________ consistently challenges him/herself to be fully alive, live on his/her edge, and live into his/her full potential
8. __________ practices self-loving and self-forgiveness
9. __________ practices forgiveness with others
10. __________ embodies patience in his/her own life and in dealings with others
11. __________ embodies peacefulness in his/her own life and in dealings with others
12. __________ appears to feel grounded and at home in him/herself and the world
13. __________ values and cultivates a deepening relationship with nature
14. __________ is proactive and courageous in seeking out ways to grow and heal

Would you like to add anything that would help describe __________’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of Cultivating the Inner World? (open text box for qualitative response)

## Integrity/Commitment/Congruence

1. __________’s actions align with her/his words
2. __________’s actions align with her/his values
3. __________’s actions align with the visions she/he carries for themselves and the world
4. __________ is authentic in her/his communication and engagements with others
5. __________ is truthful
6. __________ is trustworthy
7. __________ reflects before making commitments to ensure it is a commitment he/she is likely to follow through on
8. __________ consistently follows through on his/her commitments
9. __________ is open and transparent in his/her actions and communication
10. __________ demonstrates living from integrity in his/her life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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Would you like to add anything that would help describe __________’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of Integrity/Commitment/Congruence? (open text box for qualitative response)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radiance/Joy/Passion/Illumination Factor</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ________ is radiant and “lit up” in his/her life in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ________ is radiant and “lit up” in his/her work/service path</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. ________ is radiant and “lit up” in the context of his/her family</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. ________ is radiant and “lit up” in his/her primary relationships (intimate partner, friends, mentors, etc.)</td>
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<td>5. ________ is radiant and “lit up” in community (events, extracurricular activities, gatherings, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. ________ lives life joyfully</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. ________ is playful</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. ________ incorporates humor in his/her leadership and interactions with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. ________’s life appears to be full of magic and synchronicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ________ embraces and cultivates creativity in his/her life and service in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. ________ consistently cultivates and practices gratitude</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. ________ seems to be deeply connected to a sense of inner joy and radiance</td>
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Would you like to add anything that would help describe ________’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of Sparkle/Radiance/Joy/Passion/Illumination Factor? (open text box for qualitative response)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Leadership and Management Competencies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ________ consistently achieves what he/she intends/sets forth to accomplish</td>
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<td>2. ________ creates conditions that help others bring forward their leadership and contribute their unique gifts</td>
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<td>6. ________ approaches emotionally charged conversations and situations skillfully and is able to help achieve breakthroughs and resolution</td>
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<td>7. ________ demonstrates strong organizational skills</td>
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<td>8. ________</td>
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<th>9.</th>
<th>_______ is reliable</th>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>_______ is confident in her/his abilities and leadership</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>_______ takes a strong stand and is decisive when such an approach is needed</td>
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Would you like to add anything that would help describe _______’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **Other Leadership and Management Competencies**? (open text box for qualitative response)

### Possibility/Vision/Intention

1. _______ moves towards visions of what’s possible rather than being constrained by her/his limiting beliefs or the past

2. _______ is consistently exploring what’s possible in her/his relationships with others

3. _______ is visionary in what she/he wants to create in the world

4. _______ has vision for where she/he is going in their own life

5. _______ inspires others to support / join her/him in working towards shared visions

6. _______ leads from a place of courage and love rather than fear or negativity

7. _______ is able to see solutions and move towards them

8. _______ uses milestones, strategies, and action plans to walk towards her/his vision

8. _______ sets clear intentions (has a plan/strategy) to achieve her/his visions

Would you like to add anything that would help describe _______’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **Possibility/Vision/Intention**? (open text box for qualitative response)

### Contribution, Co-Creation, Collaboration, the Collective

1. _______ demonstrates commitment to making a contribution in the world

2. _______ considers others in her/his leadership rather than simply her/himself

3. _______ is collaborative & co-creative in her/his leadership

4. _______ has an ability to connect with a diversity of people

5. _______ is able to unite and mobilize people with differing points of view

Would you like to add anything that would help describe _______’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **Contribution, Co-Creation, Collaboration, the Collective**? (open text box for qualitative response)
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**The Wider Landscape**

1. ________ appears to be aware of large-scale patterns and socio-economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual issues of our time

2. ________ appears to be inspired by and excited about the possibilities for creating a more environmentally sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilling world

3. ________ appears to be committed to and actively participating in creating a more environmentally sustainable, socially just and spiritually fulfilling world

4. ________ is actively involved in environmental initiatives

5. ________ is actively involved in social justice initiatives

6. ________ is actively involved in spiritual initiatives

7. ________ appears to make personal choices that demonstrate their understanding and commitment to environmental sustainability and global justice (considering where their goods and services are sourced, what transportation mode to choose, what food to eat)

---

**Balance & Integration**

1. ________ balances self-care with taking care of others

2. ________ integrates life’s learning opportunities from the past to inform choices for his/her present and future

3. ________ moves with grace and ease

4. ________ makes choices in consideration of both short-term and long-term outcomes

5. ________ appears to balance his/her emotional, spiritual, physical, and mental dimensions

6. ________ appears to enjoy balance between their work life, family, intimate relationships, friendships, and community engagements

---

Would you like to add anything that would help describe ________’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **The Wider Landscape**? (open text box for qualitative response)

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Would you like to add anything that would help describe ________’s capacities or growth opportunities in the area of **Balance & Integration**? (open text box for qualitative response)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Qualitative Text Box Questions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are ______’s core strengths?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What skills have you witnessed in _____?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are _____’s natural gifts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When have you seen _____ expressing those gifts?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. What lights _____ up the most?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What are _____’s main challenges?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Where do you see they are stuck?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What do you see is possible in _____’s life that he/she might not see, and could develop further?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How has knowing ________ influenced you in your life?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>