

A GESTALT ORIENTED PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND PARTICIPATORY STUDY  
OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS OF ADOLESCENT PARTICIPANTS  
FOLLOWING WILDERNESS CENTERED RITES OF PASSAGE

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Transformation: I let you see me and began to see more of myself. Being different and being seen while standing with and belonging. I am standing in my heart; from this I am not moved. I went out to the edge and you held me, so I did not look away. I have experienced myself. I have experienced relationships. I experience gratitude.

(Adam Roth, 2005, [www.natural-passages.com](http://www.natural-passages.com))

My deepest gratitude and appreciation to my Lady Bear for all the love you've given me. To my parents, for growing me from a seed and providing fertile soil so I may thrive in life. To Jackie and Herb Stevenson for all the guidance, support, sanctuary, and community. To Herb, the Natural Passages Program, and all the Men of Medicine for standing with me and holding me up as I walk this path. To Ken Chapin for our friendship and the dissertation research assistance. To the research participants. To the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland for the training. To Sarah Toman, my dissertation chair and doctoral program advisor, you are awesome. Mother Earth, Father Sky, Great Spirit Mystery. I hold to my heart. The learning and experience that has led me to write this dissertation, to actualize my soul work. I am a very fortunate man.

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation, addresses intervention and phenomenological and participatory research methodology, through a lens of Gestalt Therapy Theory. The intervention, a wilderness-centered rites of passage, included experiential components of: (1) emersion in nature, (2) nature-based activities and challenges, (3) alone time in wilderness, (4) exposure to nature-based archetypes, elementals, and folklore, and (5) participation in community that supports connection through in ritual, ceremony, dialogue, and reflection. The participants included three early adolescent males and one adult male, a parent-participant. Data collection methods included participant observation, journal entries, photo documentation, photo elicited interviews, processing groups, and field notes. A multiple case narrative format, each focusing on a program activity component, was utilized to present data and findings representing the transformative process of the participants.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Today's adolescents lack experience with healthy rites of passage to support their development and life transitions. For many, the inner strength achieved in the reflective process of soul searching, the positive self-concept that is empowered from challenging one self in new experiences, and the relational support received from heart-felt discussions have given way to drinking, driving, sex and other risky behaviors as marking the passage to adulthood.

The loss of ritual rites of passage contributes to the societal ills we have come to know either personally, professionally, or through the media. The need youth have for some kind of initiation is so strong that it will happen with or without a healthy blueprint. Throughout history, the less complicated societies have provided blueprints for children to obtain adult status and to contribute to their communities.

([www.soulawakening.org](http://www.soulawakening.org))

The intention of this study was to gain further understanding of healthy blueprints and to further inform psychological practice of the medium of wilderness centered rite of passage in supporting and facilitating the transformative and developmental process of adolescence. I begin with one of my own experiences of the outdoors.

## Reflexive Statement

In the years of my early twenties, I used to visit an elder tree. This tree was one of four in front of the elementary school close to my home. I would visit every few days. I would walk around, sit or stand with my back up against or stand facing the tree, or lie at the base looking up into this tree. Often I would hug this tree. Sometimes I would bring this tree a gift of tobacco, corn meal, or sage. The presence of this tree evoked within me a voice that taught me of myself and the natural world of which I am part. The voice would reveal to me awareness at the depths of my being in the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, creative and relational fields. I consider this tree to be one of the great teachers of my life.

I experienced healing, transformation, development, creativity, generativity, and relationship with this tree. After having moved to a new home, a distance away from the tree, my visits became infrequent. Recently, I was strongly drawn to visit this tree again; a lot of time had passed since my last visit. When I finally did return to the tree, I came upon a scene to which I had a deeply visceral reaction. His branches were gone, a large portion of his trunk lay on the ground, about ten feet of trunk remained attached to the tree's base and roots, and there was sawdust everywhere. I gasped; that preceded a primal scream from which I collapsed into weeping. I honor the passing from this world of a being with great presence, a being that has and will continue, through the rippling resonance of that presence, to influence generations.

I chose to include this personal narrative with the intention of orienting the reader to this dissertation, to my perspective as a researcher and my relationship to what is being studied. The fields of Wilderness Therapy and Rites of Passage in both theory and

practice are something in which I have immersed myself over the last 15 years. This immersion has significantly supported my personal growth. It has significantly influenced my academic and career development. As a researcher of this field of study, I hold an emic perspective. My significant personal and professional experiences and trainings in the field have helped me to create, design, and facilitate the wilderness centered rites of passage. This experience has shaped both the way this research was organized and written, as well as influenced the way I collected, viewed, and interpreted the data. My involvement in both Wilderness Therapy and Rites of Passage experiences also informed my desire to combine the two fields into one term; wilderness centered rites of passage, for the purposes of this dissertation.

### Terms, Constructs, Context and Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation of the intervention, wilderness centered rites of passage, that mediates the subject of this study came from components of Wilderness Therapy Theory and Rites of Passage Theory. Both the intervention and the research methodology of this study are addressed in the context of Gestalt therapy theory. This dissertation research focused on participants' experiences of the change process from the lens of their therapeutic wilderness experiences. This research takes its definition of the change process from Gestalt therapy theory, most notably the concepts of awareness and meaning, as facilitated by experience. The Gestalt theoretical framework also guided the choice of research methodology in this study. First, Rites of Passage and Wilderness Therapy are described, followed by a description of the study's theoretical Gestalt

framework. Chapter One concludes with a declaration of the research questions, the limitations, and the potential significance of this research.

### *Rites of Passage*

A Rite of Passage both signifies and facilitates transformation in one's life. Rites of Passage, as ceremony, ritual, and practice, are often bound within specific cultural bases. Traditionally, Rites of Passage are present in all stages of life (Wall and Ferguson, 1998). The concept first emerged as a topic in western academic literature with the 1909 book by Albert van Gennep, titled *Rites of Passage*. The following section introduces several models of Rites of Passage experiences that have guided this study.

Van Gennep (1909, 1960) studied the South Italian Carboneria and the Kwakiutl Hamatsa Society initiations. The study described a series of passages from one stage of life to another, all involving a ceremonial or ritual structure representative of a transition of status within the society/community. Van Gennep (1960) asserted a three stage rites of passage model:

Separation - from the familiar (from previous status)

Transition - from old state to new state (a marginal or liminal period)

Reintegration - into one's original social structure (reincorporation of those passing into new statuses) (p. vii) (www.wilderdom.com)

Maddern (1990) studied Rites of Passage of adolescents within the Australian Aboriginal culture and asserted a 5 stage rites of passage model:

Symbolic Journey - Initiation, in this model, involves a journey which takes place on both real and symbolic levels. The meaning and power of the journey can be

intensified by placing it within the context of a ritual. Symbolic acts can be used to signify the departure from home, the various stages of the journey and the final return of the successful initiate.

The Challenge - This stage includes real challenges which have to be faced, and which may result in feelings of confusion, moments of intense fear, experiences of real pain and occasions when pressing needs cannot be satisfied. This stage includes times, therefore, of coming to terms with difficult emotions, of developing the ability to cope with hardship. The love and guidance of older people are key ingredients in helping the initiates pull through.

Opening the Door to the Dreaming - Initiations are times when doors are opened to Adult Knowledge – the various words used to describe the complex, many-layered systems of human society.

Responsibility - With the Adult Knowledge, and after transcending the emotional and physical tests of initiation, comes public recognition of new responsibilities.

Community Participation - The final stage of initiation is returning to the community with one's new status. This is a transformation which, though regretted and grieved for at first, is now respected and celebrated.

([www.wilderdom.com](http://www.wilderdom.com))

Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson (1986) presented an interdisciplinary paradigm with which to conceptualize Rites of Passage in adolescent development. Their paradigm includes constructs from cultural anthropology, developmental theory, psychology, sociology, and theology. Their model presents a 14 step ritual Rites of Passage process.



The conceptual steps within their Rite of Passage process model covers the: (1) old support group, (2) old identity, (3) old identity completion, (4) new environmental demands, (5) liminality of the individual in transition, (6) activation of adaptive capacity, (7) agony of developmental passage, (8) awe with respect to fate, (9) accommodation of new role, (10) ecstasy of neurophysiological deactivation following accommodation, (11) transcendence upon entry into the new identity, (12) new identity, (13) new support group, and (14) reinforcement of the new identity.

From my experiences with adolescents, the above models provide developmental explanations of change within culture while Wilderness Therapy provides the opportunities. Wilderness therapy offers another model or structure which functions as a rite of passage. One potentially initiates such ritual by crossing an environmental threshold into the unfamiliar by immersing one's self in nature or facing challenge by pushing forward through rough wilderness terrain. One's safe return to a supportive community after a time of wilderness solo, or the sharing of the story and experience with fellow seekers around a campfire, is supporting the integration and transition process of the rite of passage experience.

### *Wilderness Therapy*

Wilderness therapy has been defined as a therapeutic experience that takes place in a wilderness setting where the focus is placed on naturally occurring challenges and consequences ([www.wilderdom.com](http://www.wilderdom.com)). Wilderness therapy is designed to be a positive growth experience where participants are immersed in naturally occurring circumstances, face challenges, and experience structured risk that lead to self-examination, learning of communication and cooperation, contribution to group well-being, and opportunity and

encouragement to succeed ([www.wilderness-therapy.org](http://www.wilderness-therapy.org)). Wilderness therapy practices also recognize the restorative and healing capability of experience in natural environments.

Historically, the influence of romanticism of the nineteenth century, its writing on the experience of nature, and the conservation movement have culturally shaped the change in the view of wilderness from something to be feared and conquered to something to be protected and revered. Wilderness therapy can be traced back in its origins to the camping and recreation movements serving youth from urban areas in the mid 1800's. The tent therapy programs of the psychiatric hospitals in the early 1900's further highlighted the healing and restorative capability of outdoor experiences. In the first half of the 1900's, there was significant development of the therapeutic camping movement, which would employ psychiatrists and social workers as consultants, to focus programs on behavioral change and emotional growth. Since the mid 1900's, programs such as Outward Bound were developed, employing ropes courses, climbing, backpacking, camping, and physical conditioning to encourage personal growth and interpersonal skills. As these programs developed in the later 1900's, the program's focus also included reflection, processing or debriefing of the experiences. Currently, wilderness therapy programs have further advanced to include specific courses for at risk and identified risk populations. As a measure of quality, and in support of outcome efficacy, many of the current programs employ mental health clinicians as program facilitators or require non-clinical instructors to have specific training (Berman and Davis-Berman, 1999).

The theoretical framework from which this dissertation aligns with Wilderness Therapy is rooted in a synthesis of Ecopsychology and Adventure-Based Counseling. The combination of these therapeutic modalities provides a field of interaction to access the intrapsychic realm, the relational field in therapeutic experiences, and developmental growth. Through this foundation, a practice can be created that addresses the human experience both immersed in a natural environment and actively engaging that environment. The following paragraphs further describe the theoretical contributions of Ecopsychology and Adventure-Based Counseling.

### *Ecopsychology*

Ecopsychology suggests that there is a synergistic relation between planetary and personal well being; the needs of the one are relevant to the other (Metzner, 1999; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; [www.ecopsychology.org](http://www.ecopsychology.org)). This approach does not just address broad environmental issues, but individual experiences in outdoor environments. Ecopsychology theory comes from, but is not limited to, the fields of environmental philosophy, psychology, and ecology.

Biophilia theory (Kellert & Wilson, 1984) states that humans have a genetic disposition toward being attracted to nature and that exposure to nature supports physical and mental well being. Neill's (2004) theory, Intra-Indigenous Consciousness, states that the cumulative psychological knowledge of human evolution is genetically stored ([www.wilderdom.com](http://www.wilderdom.com)). It is the indigenous psyche within each person that can be activated through direct experiences with nature, natural elements and natural systems.

These concepts within Ecopsychology are different than traditional views of human-environment interaction, in that the impact of the natural environment remains

largely unaddressed by traditional psychology. Metzner (1998) criticized traditional psychology in saying:

The fact that we live in these particular kinds of ecosystems, in biotic communities with these kinds of species of animals and plants, in these particular kinds of geographical and climatological surroundings, appears to be irrelevant to our psychology. Yet our own personal experience, as well as common sense contradicts this self-imposed limitation. (p. 36)

Metzner (1998) further stated that:

Ecopsychology is concerned with revisioning our understanding of human identity in relationship to place, to ecosystem, and to the cycles of nature. Indigenous people have a much closer relationship to place and ecosystem. We need to learn to understand ourselves in relationship to a place and to the story of that place. (p.37)

Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner (1995) provided an overview of the topics addressed by the field of Ecopsychology through a collection of essays. In summary:

Ecopsychology goes beyond traditional therapeutic models, which rarely look beyond the individual, family, and social dimensions of the human personality, to embrace a planetary view of mental health. Ecopsychologists recognize that a capacity to live in balance with nature is essential to human emotional and spiritual well-being, a view that is consistent with the healing traditions of indigenous peoples past and present, which is lacking in present-day Western psychological theory. Ecopsychology explores environmental issues at multiple levels of system. It explores how the destruction of the biosphere results from irrational human behavior and how irrational behavior results from a damaged environment. It delves into our most intimate fantasies and fears. It probes our most repressed anxieties and depressions seeking the foundations of our destructive environmental behavior. It asks such crucial questions as: How can we redefine mental health within an environmental context? What underlies the irrational consumption habits of modern society? Why is it that when environmentalists speak of the need to reduce consumption they arouse such anxiety, depression, rage, and panic? How can the environmental movement find more effective ways to win the hearts and minds of the public than by endlessly scaring, shaming, and blaming?"  
(abstract, PsychINFO database)

Ecopsychology turns around these global/societal/community issues and explores their influences on intrapsychic and interpersonal well being and how the issues are then acted out in the individual, family, and social dimensions.

### *Adventure Based Counseling*

Adventure Based Counseling takes outdoor experiential models and combines them with psychotherapeutic disciplines. It differs from traditional counseling in that the approach includes the natural setting, the use of real and perceived risk, additional required skills, additional ethical considerations, an emphasis on processing and metaphor, and the transfer of learning to psychological, educational, sociological, physical, and spiritual benefits. Adventure Based Counseling can be used as a primary treatment or as an adjunct to more traditional types of counseling (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Itin (2001) identified Adventure-Based Counseling as both the use of specific activities (i.e., games, initiatives, trust activities), high adventure (i.e., rock climbing, white water) and wilderness (i.e., backpacking, canoeing, hiking, ect.) in conjunction with a philosophy that actively embraces the unknown, in which the challenges encountered are seen as opportunities, and the group is seen as an essential element of individual success and opportunities or genuine community are promoted.

Adventure Based Counseling is a therapeutic tool that can be adapted to almost any setting and is a mixture of experiential learning, outdoor education, group counseling, and intrapersonal exploration (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). The theoretical base of adventure-based counseling includes, but is not limited to, Experiential Learning and Outward Bound principles. Dewey (1938) offered foundational

work in experiential learning, with the basic concepts that learning is based in the experience of the present moment. Experiences of greater significance facilitate more significant learning.

The Outward Bound Model was created by Kurt Hahn in the 1930's and became formalized as Outward Bound School in 1941. Outward Bound is the leading wilderness-adventure/outdoor education organization in the world. It has been in existence for over 60 years. The Outward Bound Model includes five components that facilitate opportunities and expand principles of lived experience (James, 1980). The components of facilitated experience are: 1) students pledge themselves to personal goals; 2) control of time and activity; 3) adventure and risk in order to cultivate a passion for life; 4) operating in small groups to develop the natural leadership present in most people but often suppressed by other facets of modern life; 5) a dedication to community service. The expanded principles of lived experience are: fitness, initiative and enterprise, memory and imagination, skill and care, self-discipline, and compassion. The Outward Bound model has 5 core values: 1) adventure and challenge enhances leadership; 2) learning by doing results in confidence; 3) teamwork leads to compassion and service; 4) stewardship through social and environmental responsibility, and 5) time for perspective and reflection supports character development ([www.outwardboundwilderness.org](http://www.outwardboundwilderness.org)).

The assessed interventions offered to the adolescent participants for the purposes of this research followed the models and principals of ecopsychology and adventure based counseling. The most significant link between the interventions and the models and principles was based in the interventions' foci on emersion, experience, and challenge within the natural environment. Further, the interventions supported a developmental

process through an emphasis on participants' experiences of intrapsychic exploration, relationship with the environment, community building, and service. One intent was for participants to experience a deepening of awareness of relationship between self and environment, deepening their recognition of the influence of environmental issues upon personal and interpersonal wellbeing that is acted out in individual, family, social, and community dimensions.

Along with such principals as learning by doing, challenge promotes leadership, and reflection supports development, Gestalt therapy theory offers additional theoretical concepts which supported this research. The following paragraphs highlight several such Gestalt therapy theory concepts.

#### *Gestalt Theory and the Change Process*

Gestalt therapy theory (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951) is experientially based. It is rooted in the fundamental concepts of field theory, phenomenology, and holism. In working with an individual toward therapeutic and developmental change, the work is focused at the center of the individual's experience. Experience is based on the convergence of interpersonal, relational, and environmental forces. The individual, in his or her development, is recognized as a phenomenon of body, mind, emotion, spirit, relationship, and creativity.

#### *Holism*

Gestalt therapy theory views nature and existence as a unified whole, "greater than the sum of its parts." Human experience and our related perceptions are seen as a process of development of a fuller awareness, becoming meaningful wholes, or gestalts

(Perls et al, 1951; Crocker and Philipson, 2005). The holistic approach of Gestalt therapy theory is described, stating;

We see that meaningful wholes exist throughout nature, in physical and conscious behavior both, in the body and the mind. They are meaningful in the sense that the whole explains the parts; they are purposive in that a tendency can be shown in the parts to complete the wholes.

(Perls et al, 1951, p.34)

### *Field Theory*

Field theory (Lewin, 1951) strongly influenced the holistic perspective of Gestalt therapy theory (Perls et al, 1951). The term field is taken from physics, describing a configuration of forces. Applied to psychology “the field” is describing the complex interrelationship of forces, effects, influences and events forming a unified interactive whole (Parlett & Lee, 2005). The “field” is inclusive of;

The many environmental conditions and influences that conceptualize our existence relating to all or specific elements... the parts of our field are not separate. They are intimately intertwined, inextricably interwoven into wholes of perception and involvement. (Parlette & Lee, 2005, p.44)

As a fundamental construct of Gestalt therapy theory, Field theory brings to light the unit of inquiry as the interaction of organism and environment or the organism/environment field (Perls et al, 1951). Adolescent development and the transformative process is;

Understood as a progressive unfolding of the comprehensive field, an unfolding that includes-structuring of childhood unity, expansion and differentiation of life-space, and the transformation of the boundary processes that organize and integrate the field. (McConville, 2001, p.38)

### *Phenomenology*

The self in experience is a phenomenon of the organism/environment field. This phenomenon of interaction between organism and environment further defines the unit of



work in Gestalt therapy (Perls et al, 1951). The Phenomenological Method in Gestalt therapy structures intervention goals to develop and deepen awareness of self in interaction with environment as both internal and external phenomenon. In applied practice the Phenomenological Method in Gestalt therapy moves the practitioner to value description over interpretation and to seek to know the clients' lived experience over an "objective truth" (Crocker & Philipson, 2005).

Central to Gestalt theory's explanation of the change process is the foundation of developing awareness. Fodor (1998) described a model of change through experience that facilitates awareness, awareness that initiates a process of meaning making:

A holistic view of awareness process includes sensory, emotional, and conceptual processes operating together to create the individual's phenomenological perspective of the world. Making meaning of these moment to moment experiences is an intrinsic piece of the process. Another aspect of this process is the awareness of how am I becoming aware - how am I creating my story and enhancing awareness of other possibilities for experiencing. (p. 69)

The Gestalt change model of experience that facilitates awareness, awareness that initiates a process of meaning making, has guided this dissertation in inquiry as a foundation for the research questions, the research process, and as a strong influence in the analyses and presentation of the qualitative data.

The Gestalt change model has two additional components that are most relevant to this dissertation. First, the process of experience and awareness occurs in sequence, as depicted in the Gestalt Cycle of Experience. This is represented by Perls (1976) as a continuum of phases, "where awareness emerges into a foreground, is experienced, changed, assimilated, and then falls into the background as the next awareness emerges" (Fodor, 1998, p.54). Second, the Paradoxical Theory of Change (Beisser, 1970, 2001)

offers that the more one becomes fully who they are and embodies authentic experience, the greater is the potential for change. It is through this authenticity of self in the experience that the ground develops for change to occur. The concepts of awareness, figure/ground, the Cycle of Experience, and the paradoxical theory of change are described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

#### *Awareness and Figure/Ground*

Yontef (1993) stated that “the word Gestalt refers to the shape, configuration or whole, the structural entity, that which makes the whole a meaningful unity different from a mere sum of parts. Nature is orderly, it is organized into meaningful wholes. Out of these wholes, figures emerge in relation to a ground and this relationship of figure and ground is meaning” (p.182). Nevis (1987) described figure/ground through a metaphor of walking through a forest (ground), then noticing and attending to a single tree (figure). Awareness is the process of increasing focus on a figure that is emerging from the background through increasing attention and deepening interest. Fodor (1998) described awareness as “a central concept in Gestalt therapy. It focuses on experiencing one’s sensed impressions of the world, and highlighting of the awareness process is a central feature of therapeutic work” (p. 50).

For the participants in this dissertation research, an example of an emerging figure may have been a sense of personal strength in facing a perceived fear or risk with a horse or while experiencing a cave challenge, coming forward from the ground or background of their adventure experience. Emerging figures may lead participating individuals to become aware of an increased sense of self-efficacy after overcoming the challenge. The concept of awareness is apparent in the Cycle of Experience.

### *The Gestalt Cycle of Experience*

The Gestalt Cycle of Experience has been described as a continuum of phases (Woldt and Toman, 2005), (Nevis, 1987), (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951). Together these phases and the movement between them constitute the process of experience. The experiential phases of the cycle presented in order are sensation, awareness, mobilization of energy, action, contact, integration or assimilation, and closure or withdrawal. Sensation is the ground that is becoming figural as it moves into awareness. It is the information of the senses and lived processes that are moving into consciousness. The transition from sensation to awareness involves a sensation experienced in the ground becoming figural, of concern or importance. “True awareness is the spontaneous sensing of what arises or becomes figural, and it involves direct and immediate experience.” (Nevis, 1987, p.23). Nevis (1987) related the work of self-development as being largely devoted to improving and expanding one’s available awareness. The transition from awareness to energy mobilization is the stimulation related to the emerging figure. Deepening awareness, deepening concern, deepening importance is the motivation to enact the effort related to the figure. Mobilized energy is the “springboard” of experience into the action and contact phases. Action is the beginning manifestation of interest and intention. It draws together the attention and aroused energy to an active response, “an aggressive response to a figure of interest, a form of active participation in which the figure is literally transformed through work to comprehend and assimilate it” (Nevis, 1987, p. 27). Contact is the phase when one touches the boundary of self and other. It is the phase “in which a fully developed experience emerges from working with a figure of great interest” (Nevis, 1987, p. 28).

Learning and change occurs when one leans into their boundary. “It is acknowledgement that to make contact of any kind is to learn something about the present state of affairs” (Nevis, 1987, p. 29). Integration and assimilation is “a form of active participation in which the figure is literally transformed through work to comprehend and assimilate it ... in that the perceiver changes his or her perceptual cognitive awareness” (Nevis, 1987, p. 27). Resolution and closure is to withdraw from the figure. It is to acknowledge the experience and the learning, to recognize completion of a unit of work.

In completing the outdoor experiences of this research, the participants moved through the cycle of experience as they hiked on rough terrain. By exemplifying the cycle through this experience, the cycle began with a sensation of unsteadiness or imbalance. The awareness may be a need to be more present, to attend to the physical ground, or to have more intentioned movements and a wider stance. Mobilization of energy may be a deepening of need as one continues to stumble and a focusing attention on their physical body and creating a mental picture of their intended physical changes. Action may be making the shift in their physical body. Contact may be a fuller shift of their attention to the interaction between their body and the ground and recognizing and deepening of experience of themselves in a fuller embodied presence attaining better balance and stability as they continue to hike. Integration and assimilation may be an enjoyment and reflection on their experience of heightened ability and self-efficacy with a fuller embodied presence and considerations of the potential applications and benefits of embodied presence in other aspects of their lives. Closure and withdrawal may be a shift from embodiment to something in the natural environment that catches their attention.

Movement through the cycle is one way to describe the process of change. Another change model in Gestalt therapy theory is the Paradoxical Theory of Change.

### *Paradoxical Theory of Change*

Change occurs when one becomes what they are, not when they try to become what they are not. Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change. The more one becomes fully who they are and embodies their authentic experience, the greater is the potential for change. It is through this authenticity of self in any experience that the ground develops for change to occur.

Change does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what they are, to be fully invested in one's current positions. Change is the natural state of humankind, is movement towards wholeness where there is constant change based on the dynamic transactions between the self and the environment (Beisser, 1970, 2001).

Gestalt therapy and the Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage are experiences where immersion in nature brings a person to their natural or authentic state. This is a mirroring process of observing and experiencing an environment in its natural state. The experienced serenity of the natural world can alleviate structures of social conformity and obligation that diverge one from their authentic self. From the adventure-based perspective, a person on their edge in a nature challenge or one that finds adaptation through overcoming wilderness obstacles is accessing the fullness of their being, manifesting their authentic self. Achievement in such an experience is a process of awareness of self, in one's capacity, in one's limitations, in knowing the self from which adaptation is occurring because of desire or necessity.

The methodology of Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage is to create or access experiences that heighten awareness. Through experience, one is moved to introspection, making meaning and recognizing the self in new ways. One is drawn into environment, experiencing the person-environment or person-person(s)-environment in new, different, broader, deeper, and more expansive ways.

*Gestalt, Adolescent Development, and the Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage*

This dissertation focuses on transformative process as experienced by the adolescent participants. Adolescence is a time of significant developmental transformation in the human lifespan. In Gestalt Therapy theory, the developing child, in their adolescence, is a product of the organismic-environmental and intersubjective fields.

Development, from a Gestalt perspective, involves both the organization of interpersonal relationships and the differentiating of internal experience. But in the Gestalt approach, no domain or change is prior to another: both of these are expressions of a more comprehensive organization of the field, an evolution of the contact functions, and boundary processes that define the very meaning of self.

(McConville, 1995, p.7)

Prior to adolescence, the child is embedded in the family field. Introjects that the child makes originating from the family system, phenomenon of culture, beliefs, constructs, and behaviors, completely influence and structure the child's reality. At the time of adolescence, the embedded self configuration is more subject to the modeling and adaptations brought by the environment and family system than by a sense of agency and autonomous self that emerges later.

To describe the child self as embedded is to say that its relationship to its milieu is an essential part of its very nature. The child self is precisely a self of the family field. ... To say the child self is embedded is essentially to say that our earliest experiences of self are configured according to the

relational field of childhood. As adolescence gets under way, the experience of self includes more and more separateness, ownership, and organizational integrity. The self becomes more of a gestalt- a segregated, coherently organized whole. (McConville, 1995, p. 28-29)

In Gestalt therapy theory, the self is located at the contact boundary. The developmental process of self is occurring through deepening contact occurring at the boundary between self, other, and environment. This is described as the place of creative tension experienced between self and other, organism and environment, intrapsychic and interpersonal worlds (McConville, 1995). Polster and Polster (1973) described “the contact boundary is the point at which one experiences the ‘me’ in relation to that which is ‘not me,’ and through this contact, both are more clearly experienced” (p. 102).

Contact functions are emerging and evolving throughout the adolescent developmental process. A deepening and more defined awareness of the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes, the interrelatedness of the interior and outer worlds, are figural to the emergent self throughout the adolescents’ development. As explained by McConville (1995);

developing the capacity for contact (that is, for developing boundary conditions that support both joining and separating) is what adolescence is all about. ...The capacity for contact is the primary underlying organizational and motivational purpose of adolescent development. (p.5)

Through a clearer sense of boundary the adolescent is defining and refining themselves in relationship to their family, peers, other adults, and their forming social world. McConville also explained that;

The term boundary expresses the fundamental dialectical structure of contact itself: it is a two stroke process: one stroke is the capacity to merge, give out and take in, influence and be influenced; the other is the capacity to separate and bound, resist influence and maintain one’s unique and essential characteristics.

(1995, p. 5)

The polarities between the child-self and the adolescent-self create a condition of tension and ambivalence in the internal experience; through the developmental process the adolescent develops a more balanced self.

The field where full and satisfying contact is possible is one in which a dynamic balance is achieved between the organism's organizational integrity and its capacity to interact with its environment. The maturation of the field is the goal of adolescent development, the dynamic equilibrium toward which adolescent development tends.

(McConville, 1995 p.102)

Adolescent development is presented by McConville (1995) in a 3 phase model of disembedding, interiority, and integration. These phases of adolescent development align with the 3 stages of rites of passage separation, transition, and reintegration. (vanGennep, 1909;1969)

### *Disembedding*

The disembedding phase is identified as the adolescent beginning a process of differentiation, emerging from the introjects of the family system and other social influences. Orienting toward the individuated self, the adolescent develops a stronger sense of boundary, taking on ownership of self and authorship of experience. The deepening of the intrapsychic and interpersonal awareness supports the adolescent in regulating and grading the contact process. This further initiates for the adolescent the intrapsychic and interpersonal struggles and conflicts at the polarity of dependence and independence, having need for adult support while wanting to disengage from adult influence. Disembedding is described as a separation of the adolescent from the family and other social systems. In the rites of passage process this disembedding is supported through the separation phase as a structured ritual occurs which provides the adolescent



with experience and distinction to distance and differentiate from the former embedded structure and identity. The developmental growth provides recognition of the emerging autonomous self.

### *Interiority*

In the interiority phase the adolescent explores the differentiated intrapsychic and interpersonal fields, actualizing their sense of agency and authorship. The intensified inner landscape accessible to the adolescent provides deeper capacity for reflection and unique self-expression.

The developmental work at this stage is to expand the boundaries of the self to include aspects of experience previously relegated to ground, or projected onto environment. In this way the adolescent becomes more interior, more reflective, and more conflicted within himself. Issues previously wrestled out with parents or peers now become struggles within the boundaries of the self. This is the phase when polarities, previously mapped across the self-environment contact boundary, emerge as inner divergences that the self recognizes as its own.

(McConville, 1995 p.115)

Interiority is supported through the transition phase of the rites of passage process with specific ritual and challenge that provides direct experience of liminality. Liminality is a period of transition, a place in between, where one is transforming. The initiate experiences opportunities for self reflection, achievement through overcoming obstacles, creative individuation, and recognizing strength within and beyond self. The liminal practices in the transition stage of rites of passage bring the struggles of interiority to the surface through direct experience in a structured and supported container. The adolescent is directed to deepened intrapsychic experiences, enlightening the path toward their actualized and autonomous self.

## *Integration*

The developmental process of the integration phase is movement toward a comprehensive and inclusive self from a partial and fragmented self.

The self emerges progressively through adolescent development as a higher-order gestalt that integrates increasingly diverse aspects of self and promotes an ever-growing sense of ownership of experience. ...The boundaries of the psychological self have attained enough resilience and sturdiness to support mature contact (interchange with others that allows mutual influence without risk of disintegration).

(McConville, 1995, p.117)

Adolescents through this phase are gaining a cohesive self, capable of joining and standing with in their difference. McConville (1995) explained that, “older adolescents become truly complex beings in their own experience and can identify not just with a specific impulse or want in a specific situation but also with the need to literally be a framework sufficiently broad to encompass and integrate discordant shards of experience” (p.117). Integration is supported through the reintegration stage of the rites of passage process specifically through the ritual return to community that affirms attained identity and cohesive sense of self. The adolescent is recognized as an individual that is part of a community or family system through ceremonial recognition. As McConville (1995) stated, “the goal of adolescent development is not independence but rather interdependence” (p.118). In rites of passage the initiate is both supported in their individuality and directed to a place of belonging.

The wilderness-centered rites of passage model advocates for providing structures to support adolescents through developmental transformations. Through each of the phases of adolescent development described above, an organization of experience is offered which holds up the adolescent in healthy transformation and can redirect

vulnerable children from maladaptive patterns and self-destructive behaviors when organized rites of passage are absent. Rites of passage experiences provide ritual separation as opposed to secretive behavior; opportunities for reflection and challenge as opposed to drugs, alcohol, and other risk taking behavior; and ways to experience acceptance and be upheld in community as opposed to relying on maladjusted peers for validation. Structure and guidance through rites of passage can address the turmoil of adolescence and support wellbeing through this time of transformation.

### A Gestalt Methodological Research Approach

Phenomenology, as stated earlier, is a foundational thread of Gestalt therapy theory. These foundational roots of Gestalt therapy include the phenomenological and existentialist work of Husserl (1931), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Heidegger (1927/1962), and Bubber (1914), Van De Reit (2001), McConville (2001), Blaize (1998). Crocker and Philipson, (2005) stated;

the phenomenological method in Gestalt therapy involves a process that seeks to discover how the client's beliefs, and her understanding of events and persons in her life, function in the client's own organization of experience, and therefore how they function as the ground of her cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to current and ongoing situations. (p.69)

The theoretical framework, from which this dissertation research was approached, was Phenomenological Research. Phenomenological research theory is aligned with the study of an individual's internal change process facilitated by experience. The methodology of this study was generated from the Phenomenological research methodology of Spinelli (2005, 1989), Polkinghorne (1989), Giorgi (1985), and Van Kaam (1969). These authors identified phenomenological research as descriptive and

qualitative, an inquiry leading to the participants' and the researcher's description of experiences. It asks how meaning presents itself in experience. Researchers attend to what is present and in awareness, focusing on the meeting of person and world.

The research goals and Gestalt therapy theory principles align, in that the learning is in the doing, the participants' need to describe their experiences will enhance awareness and those awarenesses will enhance the meaning each makes of their experiences. Change is predicted to occur when participants are free to become more of who they really are and when enhanced awareness encourages movement through the subsequent phases of the Cycle of Experience. The analysis of change and assessment of the change process are further delineated in the research questions.

### Research Questions

The research process centered on group participation in a wilderness-centered rite of passage experience. Based on the phenomenological research approach the following questions guided this study:

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness-centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

Q7: What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing the outcomes of Research questions 2-7?

### Predicted Limitations of the Research

This study was conducted with a limited number of participants, four participants. With this number of participants, the research can not be generalizable, but can provide examples of individual experiences and processes. Subjectivity is taken into consideration and addressed through the use of collaborative and participatory research methods and a strong emphasis on researcher/participant reflexivity is incorporated into the research process. This is accomplished through researcher/participant partnership in the research process, emphasizing reflexive processes and the utilization of participant generated data in representation and description of experience and transformative processes (Marrow, 2005; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001).

My strong positive bias toward Wilderness Therapy Theory and Rites of Passage Theory is based in my personal and professional experience. This could also be considered a limitation, in that it also may have influenced the analyses and presentation of this work. These limitations were ameliorated by adherence to the representation of

participants' authentic experiences by staying close to the participants' words, letting their own voices be presented in the description of their experiences.

### Potential Significance of the Study

The results of this study form a narrative description and representation of the experience and transformative process of the participants. Such examples can be used to support practitioners in designing, facilitating, and the processing of such experiences. It is important that we continually invest efforts to develop structures that support the developmental process of our youth. Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage can provide a therapeutic and developmental experience that is different from traditional modalities. This difference can provide a qualitative connection for a participant that is not bridged in traditional therapeutic modalities. Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage, as an alternative or adjunct modality, can make a difference and open new avenues of transformation for participants in which traditional modalities may not have been nor will be effective. Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage, as a means of supporting our struggling youth, deserves our attention and effort. It provides a possible means to develop positive qualities, by strengthening the existing structure and foundation and opening a door of new possibilities and potential. Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage is a means of addressing at-risk behaviors before they become damaging. It can be reparative once such behaviors have had a damaging impact. It offers an experience that is both nurturing and supportive while holistically challenging. Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage can support the development of resilience that reduces the impact of the multi-systemic issues

faced by our youth in society as a whole, and can provide a healthier more positive experience of growing up.

### Summary

This first introductory chapter offered an overview of Rites of Passage, descriptions of types of outdoor adventure, along with theoretical foundations from Gestalt therapy theory.

The next chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature and research pertaining to this study. This includes research about rites of passage and wilderness therapy. A portion of the next chapter describes the literature which illustrates a relationship of rites of passage and wilderness therapy to Gestalt therapy theory. Lastly Chapter 2 focuses on the literature that links qualitative research methodology to Gestalt therapy theory.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

The following literature review summarizes research and publications in the existing theories and models related to this study. This review is intended to provide and develop support for a conceptual framework in which to place this study. This literature review also includes studies related to bridging this dissertation's theoretical foundations and methodology with existing literature from Gestalt therapy theory. The purpose of addressing this study from a Gestalt lens is threefold: to provide a theoretical context for this study, to support expansion of the field of Gestalt research in theory and practice, and to inform qualitative researchers of the utility of Gestalt therapy theory. First the reviewed literature in this chapter addresses Rites of Passage in general, Wilderness Therapy and related outdoor adventure studies, then the relevant Gestalt therapy literature.

#### Rites of Passage

Rites of Passage, as described in the literature, include both culturally centered and universal aspects of transitional rituals. The literature also addresses the critical



component of growth in a society lacking in such structured ritual. Delany (1995), through examining Rites of Passage in different cultures, found certain elements to be common to all Rites of Passage and those Rites of Passage, in some form, are universal to the experience of adolescence. Quinn, Newfield, and Protinsky (1985) reported that culturally defined and accepted Rites of Passage have given way to a more vague and meaningless set of adolescent expectations and affirmations. They described how the loss of Rites of Passage has interfered with the mission of the family to promote functional adolescent development and with the ability of the family during this life cycle stage to operate with a sense of community attachment. Scott (1998) evaluated Rites of Passage as a means of understanding and working with adolescents in a contemporary context asserting that Rites of Passage assist us, as mentors and guides, to support adolescents in their development, sense of values, and connectedness.

Indigenous cultures have traditionally utilized Rites of Passage to support the adolescent's transition to adulthood. Correal (1976), in a comparative study of adolescent Rites of Passage in indigenous cultures, found a commonly proscribed series of experiences, mainly magical and ritual, by which a child is given the rights and responsibilities of an adult. Correal concluded that such rituals tie the people to the past history of the cultural group and also delineate their future roles as adults. Markstrom and Iborra (2003) examined identity formation of Navajo adolescents in the context of traditional ceremonial Rites of Passage. Their methods included analysis of literature, observations of ceremony, and discussions with experts. Findings showed that the Rites of Passage rituals supported an optimal identity formation that was gender based and immersed in Navajo culture.

Merkur (2002) examined the vision quest experience of adolescents from the Ojibwa culture from a Psychoanalytic perspective. Merkur analyzed six narrative self reports of the adolescents' vision quest experiences. Findings indicated that vision quests supported healthy development through manifestations of ego ideals, leading in most cases to improved ego-superego integration.

From the above articles it can be concluded that the healthy development of our youth can be supported through Rites of Passage rituals. Additional studies were identified which address rites of passage specifically in the context of wilderness therapy. Wilderness therapy is defined as a therapeutic experience that takes place in a wilderness setting where focus is placed on naturally occurring challenges and consequences ([www.wilderdom.com](http://www.wilderdom.com)). The following section provides a summary of publications which merge Rites of Passage and Wilderness Therapy.

### Wilderness Therapy

In limiting the scope of this chapter, the representation of Wilderness Therapy in this literature review focuses on its use with the adolescent population. Wilderness Therapy, as a medium of intervention, has shown efficacy in the achievement of positive growth and change for many adolescent populations in multiple dimensions (Bettman, 2007; Russell, 2003; Gass, 1993). These applications are demonstrated through review of the following literature.

Carson and Gillis (1994), in examining 43 wilderness adventure oriented studies of programs serving adolescents, found that participants had a more internal locus of control, better grades, more positive attitudes, and increased self concepts following the

wilderness interventions. Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997), in a meta-analysis about the impact of wilderness adventure programs, found that participants experienced positive changes that remained stable after follow up in the dimensions of self-concept, leadership, academic, personality, interpersonal, and adventure orientation.

Wilderness Therapy has been used with experiential family counseling for families with adolescents in a multifamily group format. Research by Bendoroff and Scherer (1994) is a comparison study with 27 participant families in a four day program designed to combine wilderness therapy interventions with intensive experiential family therapy. This study found greater positive outcomes in the measures of family functioning, behavior, and self-esteem among the 27 participant families as compared to 39 non-participant families.

Wilderness therapy interventions have been used with clients diagnosed with psychopathology and/or behavioral disorders. Kelly, Coursey and Selby (1997) conducted a study with 57 people diagnosed with serious and persistent mental illness, receiving outpatient treatment, who participated in a weekly, day long wilderness therapy program for nine weeks. They found significant increases in self-efficacy, self-esteem, trust and cooperation, as well as significant decreases in anxiety, depression, hostility, and interpersonal sensitivity in the 57 adolescent participants compared to a 19 participant control group. Sachs and Miller (1992) in a study of 16 behaviorally disordered adolescents evaluated the impact of a wilderness therapy program on participants' cooperative and aggressive behaviors. Utilizing both standardized measures and direct observations, they found significant positive changes in both aggressive and cooperative behaviors after completion of the wilderness therapy program.

Bruyere (2002) reviewed the literature regarding utilization of wilderness therapy as an intervention for male juvenile delinquent offenders. This article presented appropriate benefits and realistic outcomes on which wilderness program design components could be based for this population. According to Bruyere, design using a benefits-based management approach aligns desired outcomes with program itinerary and emphasis. These include building connection to communities, equipping youth with skills to overcome obstacles, enhancing self esteem, providing healthy and facilitated opportunities to take risks, being physically active, and support defining personal identity. Necessary program aspects are maintaining an informal environment, inclusion of participants in planning, employing dedicated and sincere staff, long term follow up to sustain and build upon the benefits received.

Parker and Stoltenberg (1995) examined the efficacy of wilderness adventure programs used as an adjunct to traditional counseling with boys identified as displaying difficulties including classroom behavior problems, inadequate social skills, academic difficulties, or environmental issues putting them at risk for delinquency. Eighty four boys (aged 12-18 yrs) were divided into 4 groups: counseling and wilderness adventure, counseling only, wilderness adventure only interventions and a no-intervention control. Participants completed assessments measuring apathetic isolation, adolescent turmoil, dependence and inhibition, locus of control, and self-esteem. Participants were assessed at pre- and post- treatment and at 6 month follow-up. Findings indicated significant long-term influence of the adventure interventions alone occurred only in areas of reducing apathetic isolation and increasing internal locus of control. Outcomes improved when adventure was integrated with on-going counseling to demonstrate decreases in apathetic

isolation, adolescent turmoil, and increase in self-esteem. For counseling alone, long term gains were more limited demonstrating no change in areas of locus of control and self-esteem, less positive change than treatment in apathetic isolation, same amount of change in adolescent turmoil, and greater long term positive change than adventure and counseling in dependence and inhibition. Findings indicated most significant change occurred when adventure was integrated with on-going counseling. This study demonstrates that wilderness therapy programming as a counseling adjunct has greater efficacy to improve outcomes than the treatment of counseling alone.

Gills and Simpson (1991) studied an adventure based counseling intervention and treatment with court-referred adolescent drug abusers. The authors studied the experiences of 29 adolescents attending an 8-wk residential treatment program for drug-abusing, adjudicated adolescents. The interventions used an adventure-based counseling model to instill change. Counselors rated the participants using the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1987). The participants also rated themselves and were rated by peers regarding behavior change and underwent random urine screenings for drug use. Participants completed the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI; Hathaway & McKinley, 1982) and the Battle Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory (Battle, 1981). Statistical analyses of the instruments and reports from this group indicated that the program had a significant positive effect on participants' behaviors.

The previous sections have separately reviewed Rites of Passage research and Wilderness Therapy research. This next section of studies focuses on research that

combines both Rites of Passage and Wilderness Therapy. The following studies are most aligned with the research topic and methods of this dissertation.

#### Research Literature Aligned with this Study

This review highlights specific examples of research on Rites of Passage, Wilderness Therapy interventions, and specific studies of the use of Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage with adolescents that utilized qualitative methods. The studies have shown that, similar to indigenous ceremony and ritual, contemporary adolescents are being supported in development and connection to self, others, and community through Rites of passage, wilderness therapy, and the Wilderness-centered Rites of Passage.

Doucette (2004) conducted a qualitative study with eight students (aged 9 to 13 years) that explored the question: “Do preadolescent and adolescent youths with behavioral challenges benefit from a multimodal intervention of walking outdoors while engaging in counseling?” (p. 373). For eight weeks, students from a middle school in Alberta, Canada participated weekly in the Walk and Talk intervention. Students' self-reports indicated that they benefited from the intervention. Research was triangulated with reports from involved adults who supported findings that indicated the students were making prosocial choices in behavior, and were experiencing more feelings of self-efficacy and well-being. The results of the Walk and Talk intervention study showed that the youth felt better about themselves, explored alternative behavioral choices, and learned new coping strategies and life skills by engaging in a counseling process that included the benefits of mild aerobic exercise, and that nurtured a connection to the outdoors.

Quamina (2003) examined five young adolescent men of color who underwent a spiritual rite of passage and experienced a series of dialogues with an emphasis on Self-Awareness, Self-Determination, Identity, and Spirituality. This study examined how meaning and purpose can be restored through the implementation of a spiritually based rite of passage. A qualitative participatory research methodology was utilized to generate the topics of rediscovery through the collective of participants, and provide actual voice to clarify and create a renewed understanding of the benefits of a rite of passage. Members participated in a four-week indigenous model of intense learning that imitated a model similar to their original ethnic heritage. In this study, conclusions indicated that by going through a spiritual Rite of Passage and by reclaiming their indigenous voices, the participants experienced a reintroduction to their mission and purpose in life, their intricate connection with nature and spirituality, reinvigoration of their human orientation and stewardship, their intrinsic value and worth as human beings, and preparation for the anticipated stages of adult life and living.

Hunter (2000) studied 8 adolescent Caucasian participants in a wilderness based Rites of Passage program, five females and three males from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The researcher interviewed each participant 3 times: before the wilderness rite, immediately following, and 1 year later. During these interviews the researcher recorded the participants' current life issues, reasons for participation, the experience itself, and their incorporation of the experiences over the following year. This transpersonal research focused on 3 critical aspects of the youths' experiences: the issues young people face as they transition into adulthood, the impact of the rite of passage on that transition, and the resulting wisdom. Using organic inquiry, the treatment of data

included (a) presentation of the individual stories, (b) thematic analysis, and (c) transformative change in the researcher resulting from the study. Findings showed that participants attributed the following to the wilderness based Rites of passage experience: increased self-esteem, clarity, self-understanding, responsibility for environmental and social issues, spirituality, insight into the lived experience, and movement from masculine to feminine values. Themes of their work included separation from family, importance of community, psychological healing, sexuality and relationship, education and work, drugs, and creativity. The author expressed the importance of wilderness rites of passage in the critical task of reversing the prevailing cultural perception which discredits the voices of young people to one which empowers youth to become capable messengers of personal and collective wisdom.

Foster (1998) conducted a descriptive study of the initiatory experiences of 9 adolescents (aged 16-19 yrs) engaged in a wilderness rite of passage experience. The study utilized participant observation, experiential narrative, and researcher reflection to generate description. The structure for the 10 day vision quest program included: four days of intensive preparation, three days of alone time and fasting in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and three days of story telling in the elders' council. Findings of this study asserted that adolescents' "hunger for experiences that heal childhood wounds and bring them face to face with their true nature, as is reflected in the mirror of the wilderness" (p. 213). The author argued that the adolescent drive to "grow up" is the same drive that causes the tree to shed its leaves in the Fall, yet we are not preparing our children to face the winter crisis that will come. While they feel an overwhelming need to follow the ancestral way that leads to mature understanding, our failure as a society to provide rites



of initiation has resulted in our children's inability to find and know a sense of place in the world.

These studies were reviewed to demonstrate the transformative experiences through both Wilderness Therapy and Rites of Passage. The synthesis of both of these experiential methods may provide opportunities for today's adolescents to make change in their lives. Looking through the Gestalt lens can provide insight into the transformative process and act as a vehicle of exploration and description of the meaning made of such change within Wilderness-centered Rites of Passage experiences.

#### Gestalt Relationship to Theoretical Foundation and Methodology

No specific literature was located which utilized qualitative methodology to study a Gestalt oriented wilderness-centered rites of passage experience. There was, however, minimal literature combining Gestalt therapy theory with the individual specific theoretical and methodological components of this dissertation. The literature found is largely theoretically based and not inclusive of research studies.

#### *Rites of Passage*

Plummer and Tukufu (2001), through a Gestalt context including both theory and the use of 8 case examples of African American adolescents and their programs, explored the concept of racial identity development. The authors used the lens of the evolutionary phases of the Gestalt concept of contact boundary and through utilizing Rites of Passage as racial socialization intervention in the African-American community, both as an alternative form of healing and a supportive function of psychotherapy. The studied Rites of Passage experiences were found to provide developmental opportunities in spiritual,

physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and cultural contexts. The authors stated that most African-American Rites of Passage experiences contain the following components: foundations of African spirituality and world view, bonding and team building, African and African-American culture and history, mental and emotional development, physical development, discipline and responsibility, community service, and initiation. This use of Gestalt theory, by embracing the holistic context of the individual in a phenomenological stance, offers a framework for understanding adolescents in the larger context of racial identity consciousness, incorporating indigenous cultural forms of healing and the racial socialization process as a supportive function of psychotherapy.

### *Wilderness Therapy*

Adams (2005) described the practice of ecopsychology in that it;

Works for a radical transformation of humankind's disassociative relationship with the other than human natural world...Ecopsychology fosters movement beyond our exclusionary identification as ego-centered subjects; our belief in a real and inevitable dualistic separation of humans and nature; and our anthropocentric view of humans as the exclusive locus of meaning and value.  
(p.269)

The focus of inter-subjectivity and awareness in the theoretical model of Gestalt therapy supports this practice when the two fields are integrated.

The combination of Gestalt and Ecopsychology theories were found in the reviewed literature. Cahalan (1995) stated that Gestalt therapy theory "presents a view not only of the individual person's functioning, but also of the functioning and nature of the Earth and universe" (p.87). "More than any other therapy, Gestalt appears to view the Earth and the universe as more like a living organism than like a mechanism or machine. It therefore seems to provide the best theoretical context, as well as the most fitting

methodology for a therapy that pays attention to the client-natural world relationship (p.88). The choice of Gestalt therapy theory as a foundation for this dissertation is echoed in these quotations.

Cahalan (1995) further discussed a re-enchantment and an illumination of awareness and meaning that emerges as one deepens their emersion into natural environments. Swanson (1995) stated that “the theory and practice of Gestalt therapy is fertile ground for the emergent field of Ecopsychology” (p.51). The author elaborated upon four key components in the emerging relationship between the fields of ecopsychology and Gestalt therapy: a biological-ecological perspective of human collective and individual experience; an I-Thou dialogic paradigm that makes possible reverence for and subjective relationship between a person and the natural world; an approach toward self as an embodied self which provides a methodology through which the ending of the alienation from and reconnecting with our bodies establishes “a primordial and vital connection between the alive and aware human body and the body of the living earth” (p.54); and a focus on sensory awareness to support healthy contact, that supports “being outdoors in nature is ideal for awakening the senses” (p.57). Swanson further stated that the “Gestalt approach is based on the belief that enhanced awareness is curative, that it is a tool for personal growth and can offer a comprehensive theoretical framework that brings in the natural environment into its understandings of mental health and disease” (p.59).

Rudiger’s (1998) study is a comparative analysis of Gestalt therapy and Adventure therapy, emphasizing that both have their foundations in the experiential tradition. The author included eleven areas of commonalities between the two therapies:

(1) emphasis on personal growth and present potentials, (2) promoting growth through the creation of disequilibrium and tension, (3) ‘challenge’ in adventure education versus ‘the creative experiment’ in Gestalt, (5) characteristics of process and flow (nonpredictability of experience, need for spontaneity and flexibility), (6) focus on the present and concrete examples, (7) holistic approach to learning or therapy, (8) Gestalt belief in self-organizing systems versus the educational concept of constructivism, (9) transparent goals and limits, (10) focus on internal control, self, and self responsibility, and (11) confrontational approach to therapy or experiential group work evaluation. (p. 130)

The previous paragraphs highlighted theoretical similarities, while the following paragraphs highlight components of the Wilderness-centered Rites of Passage in practice, as benefitting from the Gestalt therapy model’s means of processing and integrating experiences. The literature in this section also demonstrates the benefit the qualitative research methodology that Gestalt therapy theory offers in the research process as a means of constructing data and making meaning.

### *Methodology*

This section of the literature review is an illustration of the bridge between the chosen research methodology for this dissertation and Gestalt therapy theory. The purpose of addressing this methodology through a Gestalt lens is to inform qualitative research practitioners of the utility of Gestalt therapy theory. It is also to expand the field of Gestalt research in theory and practice. Three influences of Gestalt therapy theory on research methodology are: researcher as instrument, collaboration between researcher and participant, and the common theoretical foundation of Phenomenological Research.

#### *Researcher as Instrument*

Brown (1997) aligned techniques within Gestalt therapy theory to the personal research tools and reflexivity of the qualitative researcher. Brown stated:

Gestalt fundamentals provide advantageous training for researchers of qualitative methodology in using themselves as their own instrument. Trained Gestalt therapists have much to offer in the areas of awareness, actuality, complexity, personal responsibility, and staying with the process. These are all desirable skills for the qualitative researcher. (p. 71)

Brown also reported on a skill set that Gestalt practitioner training can provide for the qualitative researcher. The skill set includes tools for: (1) awareness of oneself, others, and context, (2) assessment and development of the ability for relationship, (3) ability to use oneself as instrument, and (4) a process orientation.

#### *Participatory/Collaborative Research*

Wennberg and Hane (2005) examined participatory research from a Gestalt perspective. They described participatory research as a process in which “all participate actively in thinking about issues, clarifying the questions, planning the project, and collecting and analyzing the data, and they are active in the presentation of the results” (p. 248). The authors described aspects of participatory research that are aligned with Gestalt theory as: (1) eliminating hierarchical order and reasoning, (2) making knowledge and the knowing process accessible, (3) locus of control as a direction of inquiry, (4) a present centered “here and now” orientation, (5) the distinguishing of the experiences of action and the experiences of the internal world, and (6) the use of descriptive language that further focuses on the use of dynamic description over static description. They further described participatory research as a method that supports the participant-researchers to “take the time to explore the systematic patterns of one’s own thinking, penetrate one’s logic, find contradictions and loose ends, and make necessary connections with what else is known about the matter at hand” ( p. 269).

Barber and Mauer (2006) described the use of a “collaborative action research inquiry” method from a Gestalt perspective. This method of inquiry is described in terms of stages that happen in recurring cycles throughout the research process. These stages parallel the Gestalt cycle of experience and include:

1. Clarifying and planning- contemplating and raising awareness about the purpose and structure of inquiry;
2. Engaging and observing- experientially engaging, giving ourselves over to the energetic field while observing the processes of investigation;
3. Integrating and debriefing- meditating on the value and meaning of the information raised. (p.74)

*Foundations of Gestalt Therapy Theory in Phenomenological Theory*

Stolorow and Jacobs (2006) discussed the role of phenomenology in Gestalt therapy theory’s philosophical and epistemological base. They described the tension between two positions of methodological inquiry: 1) adherence to presuppositionless inquiry, which strives to access and describe experience without the influence of bias, assumption, or preconceived notion, being viewed as a purist stance and 2) the taking into account of the organism/ environment field, “the relational or dialogical, and thus inevitable perspective and interpretive nature of all psychological investigation.” (p. 45)

Van De Reit (2001) offered a critical analysis of the utility of the Phenomenological method of reduction in psychological inquiry and its practice in Gestalt therapy. The impossibility of a truly pure experience being captured is described

through the contradictory contexts of Field Theory and Dialogic Existentialism, which represents the significant limitations of reduction in practice.

The evidence from various sciences supports these hypotheses of field theory; the observer and the observed invariably mutually influence one another. The data from numerous studies indicate that objective observation or objective interaction between people is not achievable. (p. 189)

McConville (2001) in response to Van De Reit (2001), considered the contribution of phenomenology to Gestalt therapy theory from the perspective of discerning literal application to practice and providing ontological justification for the “way we practice.” He attributed this influence to the practices of “anchoring ourselves in immediate experience... attending, respecting the role of the Other’s experiences, appreciating the role of our own biases’ ... which all play a role in ‘co-creating the emergent meanings of the therapeutic field” (p. 203). Further, phenomenology is represented as “providing a philosophical foundation and justification for Gestalt therapy’s reverence for human experience.” (p. 195)

Crocker and Philipson (2005) described three constructs that operate within Phenomenological theory that influence Gestalt therapy theory:

Epoche - to bracket the truth or falsehood of any and all interpretations of reality; Description - to provide a dispassionate description of the immediate and concrete impressions of what happened, as opposed to any interpretations of that experience; Horizontalization or Equality - to avoid any hierarchal assumptions as to which described element is more important than any other.” (p.67)

They go on to describe the Gestalt Phenomenological method as;

A process that seeks to discover how the client’s beliefs, and her understanding of the events and persons in her life, function in the clients own organizational experience, and therefore how they function as the ground of her cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to current and ongoing situations. (p.69)

Barber (2006) described the holistic analysis of the phenomenological field. He designed a model for inquiry that is aligned with the Gestalt principles applicable to field analysis as outlined by Parlett (1993). This model of Gestalt phenomenological inquiry based in analysis of organismic wholes and relational fields includes the following research questions and Gestalt principles (in italics):

What is happening in this phenomenon/organization/person's life? (*Figure*)  
What are the longer term structures of this phenomenon/organization/person's life? (*Ground*)  
In what ways does this phenomenon/organization/person seek to be distinct and separate from other structures/persons it/they may meet? (*Differentiation*)  
In what way does this organization/person seek to merge or unify with structures/others they/it meets? (*Confluence*)  
How resistant to change is this person/phenomenon/organization? (*Resilience*)  
How willing and able is this person/phenomenon/organization to change? (*Reconfiguration*)  
Which levels of functioning- sensory/physical, social/cultural, emotional/transferential, imaginal/projective, symbolic/transpersonal- does this person/phenomenon/organization characteristically move between? (*Laminated field*). (p. 39)

The Gestalt section of this literature review, as well as this dissertation, is reflective of my experience in the study and practice of a Gestalt approach in clinical practice. Gestalt therapy theory is an inclusive theory that continues to grow and develop. It encompasses a broadening field of theory from multiple disciplines that seems driven to further its potential application. The methodology of this dissertation research reflects the inclusive and broadening aspects of this theory, as the theory is adapted from clinical practice to research design and theory.

### Summary

This second chapter has offered an overview of relevant research on Rites of Passage, Wilderness Therapy, and the published research most closely related to the



integral theme of this study. Further it described the literature of a Gestalt therapy focus linking it to rites of passage, wilderness therapy, and the qualitative research methodology of this study. The next chapter provides a detailed description of the theoretical research methodology, standards for quality and trustworthiness, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and presentation structure for this study, utilizing literature from the field of qualitative research to explain and justify the use of the methodology for this study.

### CHAPTER III

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This Chapter outlines the research methodology for this study of a transformative process in a Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage experience with Adolescents.

Literature will be used to explain the choices of methodological design and to illustrate the research process and its methods. This dissertation focused on participants' experiences of the change process in wilderness centered rites of passage experiences, taking the theory of change process from Gestalt therapy theory, in that awareness and meaning can be facilitated by experience (Fodor, 1998). In addition to Gestalt therapy, Phenomenological theory forms the theoretical foundations of this study. The intentions of this chapter are: to explain the methods of Phenomenological research; to state the research questions in application to the research process; to describe the methods of participatory research, case narratives, selection of participants, and confidentiality; to describe the methods of data collection; and to describe the methods of data analysis.

Wilderness centered rites of passage programs are a synthesis of the theoretical bases of wilderness therapy, rites of passage, ecopsychology, and adventure-based

counseling. Participants in this study were from a pool of adolescent students choosing to participate in the Tree Bear Institute's wilderness-centered rites of passage program. Participation in both the research and the program were designed to support and supplement their existing developmental process and experiences. The studied experiences included components of: (1) emersion in nature, (2) nature-based activities and challenges including drumming, hiking, caving, working with horses, creative experience and projects, and visiting nature related experiential sites, (3) alone time in wilderness for reflection, (4) exposure to nature-based archetypes, elementals, and folklore that represent aspects of healthy development and relationship, and (5) participation in a community that supports nature-centered rites of passage through connection to nature in ritual, ceremony, dialogue, and reflection.

The wilderness centered rites of passage program in which participants took part, included an all day group program and a partial day individual program. In the group program all participants were in attendance. This program and the related research process were supported by additional facilitator-researchers. The sequence of activity components of the group program included: arrival and orientation, drum circle, hike and snowball fight, horse facilitated challenge, building of a hay bale fort, hike to the river, breaking and casting of river ice sheets, and the receiving of a medicine pouch. The group program was designed to support developing relationally; to access the adventure in wilderness experience; and to explore the self as individual, as group member, and as interconnected with nature. The individual program was led by the main facilitator-researcher and was attended by each participant, individually. This was an interaction between the facilitator and a single participant, and repeated for each participant on a

different day. The individual programs were conducted between 6 and 9 months after the group program. The sequence of activity components of the individual program included: a ritual passing across the threshold immersing into nature, hiking, river elemental, rock elemental and solo in a cave, tree elemental, and conclusions with receiving a crystal for the medicine pouch. The individual program acted as a follow up to the group program, supporting the rites of passage aspects of sense of belonging, sense of place, and sense of relationship to greater community in nature.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework from which this dissertation was approached is Phenomenological Research. Phenomenological research theory is aligned with the study of an individual's transformative process as facilitated by experience. The methodology of this study will be based on the phenomenological research methodology of Spinelli (2005), Moustakas (1994), Polkinghorne (1989), Giorgi (1985), and Van Kaam (1969). These authors identified phenomenological research as descriptive and qualitative, as an inquiry leading to description of experience and how meaning presents itself in experience. Researchers attend to what is present and in awareness, focusing on the meeting of person and world.

Wertz (2005) explored phenomenological research methods for counseling psychology, stating this approach is "especially suited for counseling psychologists whose work brings them close to the naturally occurring struggles and triumphs of persons" (p. 176) and that bracketing of assumptions and commitment to description

distinguishes phenomenological methods from other research approaches. Wertz outlined the following core phenomenological elements in psychological research:

- (a) setting aside previous theories
- (b) securing descriptive access to the immanent meanings within psychological life as it occurs in natural contexts
- (c) analyzing the complexities of these meanings by using reflection on the psychological processes that constitute them
- (d) gaining insight about what is essential to the psychological processes under study. (p.175)

Spinelli (2005), Landridge (2004), Moustakas (1994), Polkinghorne (1989), Giorgi (1985), and Van Kaam (1969) described concepts and phases within the phenomenological research methodology that supported the shaping of the research process of this dissertation, aligning it with phenomenological research methods. The following concepts are described sequentially: Intentionality, Noema and Noesis, Intersubjectivity, Epoché, Reduction, and Imaginative Variation.

### *Intentionality*

Intentionality refers to the relationship between one's experience and what is being experienced. It is to focus upon the consciousness of intentional relationship to what is and what is within the world (Landridge, 2004). Moustakas (1994) further described intentionality as awareness of the process of mind; an object exists within the mind in an intentional way. Intentionality is a mind process in which consciousness is directed toward something. "Knowledge of intentionality requires that we be present to ourselves and to things in the world, that we recognize that self and world are inseparable components of meaning." (p28).

*Intentionality*, in this dissertation, occurred in the transparency of the research process to the participant/researchers, a focusing in present centered experience, and in

the semi-structuring of the data collection methods supporting participants to track experience-awareness-meaning.

### *Noema and Noesis*

Moustakas (1994) described Noema and Noesis as referring to the objective (Noema) and subjective (Noesis) meanings of experience. It is through the acts of thinking, reflecting, feeling, remembering, imagining, and judging that a process of making of perceptual meaning occurs. Noema is the direction of consciousness (intentionality) toward a specific something (object), evoking a perceptual meaning making, an awareness of physical, nominal, objective quality. Noesis is the ‘feeling-act’ evoked by the directing of consciousness onto a specific something, a process of deepening of meaning beyond the initial layer of perception evoking a greater complexity of subjective experience. This process continually cycles in consciousness as an emerging noesis and draws the attention to a new or a transforming noema. “Noematic elements fall back on the noetic phases; the noetic phases return to noematic features; a rhythm is established” (p. 72).

*Noema and Noesis* were specifically addressed in this dissertation research process in the collection and organization of data focusing on the specific intervention components and emergent awarenesses (objective) and the transformative process in meaning making (subjective).

### *Intersubjectivity*

Intersubjectivity, in theory, is to have awareness of the experiencing of other as not a phenomenon within the self. “The method through which the Other becomes accessible to me is that of empathy, a thereness-for-me of others” (Moustakas, 1994, p.

37). Further, Moustakas described intersubjectivity as a relationship of co-presence, recognizing the external nature of other as co-present in intentional communion.

I must first explicate my own intentional consciousness before I can understand someone or something that is not my own, someone or something that is apprehended analogically. My own perception is primary; it includes the perception of other by analogy. (p.37)

*Intersubjectivity* was thematic throughout the research process and interventions of this dissertation, through both the tracking of the participants' experiences during the research and during the intervention processes as a developing community. As echoed by Swanson (1995), emersion in nature supports communion with nature and takes on a subjective relational quality between participant and the natural world as reflected in the I-Thou paradigm.

### *Epoche*

Epoché is a Greek word used in phenomenological research to mean the process by which attempts are made to abstain from presuppositions, preconceived ideas, biases, and assumptions held by the research of what is being studied (Landridge, 2004).

See it as a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience itself and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again for the first time.  
(Moustakas, 1994, p. 85)

*Epoche* was addressed in this dissertation through a research and intervention focus that investigated researcher's/participants' prior beliefs, contextual biases, and preconceived notions related to the intervention and the research process.

### *Phenomenological Reduction*

Phenomenological Reduction is a continuation of the descriptive process beyond what begins with Epoché. It is a process of repeated reflection, examination and

elucidation from multiple perspectives to uncover the layers of meaning inherent within the phenomenon (Landridge, 2004). The process of phenomenological reduction is described in the following stages by Moustakas (1994):

*Bracketing*, in which the focus of the research is to be placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely in the topic and question; *horizontalizing*, every statement initially is treated as having equal value. Later, statements irrelevant to the topic and question as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the *Horizons* (the textural meanings and invariant constituents of phenomenon); *Clustering the Horizons into Themes*; and *Organizing the Horizons and Themes Into a Coherent Textural Description* of the phenomenon. (p.97)

The *Phenomenological Reduction* process was accomplished in this dissertation research through the use of the case study format as a tool for bracketing and horizontalizing individual experience and intervention components, drawing themes from the cases that reflect the Gestalt transformative model and converging them into a descriptive narrative of the overall intervention experience.

#### *Imaginative Variation*

Imaginative Variation is “the process of approaching the phenomenon being experienced from different perspectives through imaginatively varying different features of the phenomenon” (Landridge, 2004, p. 279). It was described by Moustakas (1994) as a seeking of possible meanings by a way of integrating the structures into essences through use of “imagination, varying frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (p.97). Moustakas further described the following four steps of imaginative variation:

1. Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings



2. Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon
3. Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structures of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others
4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of structural descriptions of the phenomena. (p.99)

The use of *Imaginative Variation* was relevant in this study, as participant/researchers dialogued by processing group reflections on their multiple perspectives of individual and shared experiences, awarenesses and meanings. Phenomenological research was chosen for this study as it is a vehicle for rich description. I was drawn by the descriptive potential for the tracking of experiential processes. The subjective quality of having multiplicity of outcomes, as opposed to general findings, fits with adolescents' abilities to orate multiple meanings from their experience. A phenomenological study is aligned with documenting the rich complexity of transformative process evoked by wilderness experiences. Each of the above terms influenced this research process in my work as the primary researcher and through the inclusion of participants in the research process.

### Research Questions

Based on a foundation of phenomenological research, the following questions will guide this study:

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

Q7: What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing the outcomes of Research Questions 2-7?

### Quality, Trustworthiness, and Credibility of Qualitative Research

Marrow (2005) viewed the criteria for trustworthiness and credibility for qualitative research to be paradigm bound. In this view, standards of quality emerge from and are congruent with particular paradigms. She also viewed certain qualities to be indispensable across paradigms of qualitative research including: social validity, sufficiency of and immersion in the data, attention to subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation and presentation.

Phenomenological research falls within the paradigm of Constructivism-Interpretivism which Ponterotto (2005) suggested adheres to the subjective nature of human phenomenon. This dissertation study aligns itself with an expanded awareness which indicates that multiple individuals hold multiple realities of experience providing

multiple meanings that are influenced by context. Thus, this perspective holds the possibility of multiple truths that do not require verification from an outside source. Validity may then be judged through the quality of description presented within the study.

Further addressing subjectivity as a criteria of quality and trustworthiness in phenomenological research, Amedeo (2004) offered a balanced approach to subjectivity that: (1) acknowledges a theoretical perspective that recognizes that there are invisible or non-sensorial characteristics of subjectivity that have to be theoretically appropriated, and (2) emphasizes the inter-subjective dimension as being critical for properly assessing a balanced approach to human subjectivity. A subject-dependent perspective that can efface its own interests is the attitude that is required for the achievement of objectivity. In this study, a transparency of the inner-subjective process was intended. Striving for this type of objectivity speaks to utilizing research methods supportive of reflexive self inquiry as a source of data for both participant and researcher.

Churchill (2000) addressed validity in phenomenological research as an aim to achieve fidelity with respect to an original experience using narrative data and narrative methods of analysis. The validity of the narration must take into consideration the possibility of “distortion” in the reflexive movement from the lived to the known. To be able to see the difference between truth and groundless assertion is a basic task for the phenomenologist. In addition, to strive for narrative validity with regard to the reported experience of others, our intuition as an experienced sensory que to direct attention will serve us when listening to others’ accounts of their experience. Being able to see these differences requires that one be attuned to that which serves as the ground for reaction.

## Research Methods

A participatory research model was used for this dissertation, integrating participants into the research process. From this theoretical framework, a series of case narratives explores the lived experiences of participants in the Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage experience. To support credibility, the data collection methods were participant and researcher generated photographic documentations that guided interviews, participants' journal entries, and recordings and transcription of processing groups. Data analyses utilized the constant comparative method of grounded theory research in creating codes reflective of the Gestalt therapy theory change model. Data is presented, in part, as program component case narratives and, in part, as an analysis of narratives across individual experiences.

### *Participatory Research*

A participatory model was chosen because it is aligned with a process that supports participants' developmental and transformative experiences. Participants were invited to create a personal narrative that gave voice to their lived experiences. Whyte (1998) and Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) described participatory research as a practice where community members actively participate in the research process. This contrasts with conventional research models in which participants are treated as passive subjects. In participatory research, participants are actively engaged in the quest for information (awareness) and ideas (meaning) to guide their future actions (development and transformation).

A participatory model was chosen to ameliorate researcher bias and support authenticity of the data, its analyses, and its presentation. Kidd and Kral (2005) advocated for this type of method due to its potential to make significant contributions in areas relevant to counseling psychology. They identified key elements of a participatory approach between researcher and participants as understanding, mutual involvement, change, and a process that promotes personal growth. Smith (1997) described support of validity in qualitative research through a participatory method as its use of multiple perspectives, thick description, and reflection in the participatory process.

The following literature is representative of the potential for research participation and collaboration to support transformation and development through giving voice to participants' experiences. Small (1998) described a participatory/collaborative model as useful in creating positive outcomes for adolescents. In this process-person-context model it was the actual participatory research process that had an impact on adolescent growth. He articulated that this research model, through shared knowledge between researcher and participant, supported development of awareness, individuality, agency, and relationship.

Meyer, et al. (1998) conducted a series of research studies about social relationships which utilized a participatory research model. They explored, from a cultural and developmental context, how children, adolescents and young adults make, keep and end friendships. Their studies focused on cultural diversity and disability. Data was collected and presented in first hand form from participants often emphasizing its generation through collaborative projects and intersubjective sharing between researcher

and participant. Participation in these studies was shown to support participants' social/relational development, providing insight into their own relational processes.

### *Case Narratives*

This dissertation research used a multiple case narrative format to present the data and findings of the experience of the participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage program. The case narrative is similar to the case study; case narrative and case study literature is reviewed in this section to describe the case narrative method of data presentation for this dissertation. The term case narrative has been chosen to discern the presentation of change process that is focused on the experience, as opposed to the change process focused on the individual. Descriptively, the case narratives focus on the experience as narrated from multiple individuals, constructing an experiential narrative. As aligned with the goal of creating narrative that focuses on experience, the use of pronouns over pseudonyms for quotes in the case narratives was chosen. This choice was made to support the intention to not focus on the individual participants, but to focus on the descriptive experiences and analysis of change process for each program activity. Thus, the case narrative is organized around the program activity and change process, not the participants.

Ungar, Dumond, and McDonald (2005) used a case narrative format in researching wilderness therapy experiences, both in exploring components of individual programs and in the participants' experiences, reactions and outcomes of the programs. The methodology of their study was presented as a multiple case study format for two wilderness therapy programs. Data collection from 14 participants included facilitator-researcher observations, written program evaluations from participants and facilitators,

and qualitative interviews of the participants. Results were presented in narrative form that offered comparisons between the two programs, including program component description, presentation of perceived outcomes and change mechanisms.

Rosenwald (1988) described the use of multiple case studies for the presentation of data represented in the following quote.

In the proposed model of multiple-case study, individual cases, captured through exploratory interviews, are brought into "conversation" with one another. This permits shared realities to be reconstructed out of individuals' perspective images.  
(Rosenwald, 1988, p. 239)

Rosenwald further made a strong statement endorsing the necessity of balance between representing the individuality of participants and the generalization of findings in presenting qualitative case study research, stating:

Our preoccupation with uniqueness segregates society and the individual conceptually, relating them to each other only tentatively as the loci independent and dependent variables, respectively. But if we thus isolate human beings from each other (as unique) and from their organized totality (as autonomous), then the detailed stories of their lives are reduced to no more than an entertainment, perhaps captivating, but scientifically marginal.  
(Rosenwald, 1988, p. 240)

Data and findings of this dissertation are presented in the form of individual case narratives which will represent the participants' transformative experiences within each program component of the wilderness-centered rites of passage experience. The model presented by Moustakas (1994, 1990) of representation through heuristic phenomenological inquiry methods was utilized in this study to organize and present the data and findings in the case narrative format. Moustakas described this method in the following statements:

Heuristic research is a wide open investigation in which typically the research participant widely and deeply explores the phenomenon. Rarely

is only one example or situation used to depict the research participants' experience.

(Moustakas, 1994, p.18)

In heuristics the researcher, in addition to narrative descriptions, seeks to obtain self-dialogues, stories, poems, artwork, journals and diaries, and other personal documents that depict the experience.

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 8)

Heuristic research aims toward composite depictions that remain close to the individual stories rather than elucidating situational structural dynamics. Heuristic investigations culminate in creative synthesis.

(Moustakas, 1994, pp.18-19)

In heuristics the research participants remain visible in the examination of the data and especially in the individual portraits they continue to be portrayed as a whole person.

(Moustakas, 1994, p.19)

The use of the heuristic phenomenology model for this dissertation is aligned with this study's use of participatory research methods by allowing opportunity for participants to voice their perceptions and experiences. It also seems optimal for supporting the creative process that brings forth the potential to most fully depict the richness and depth of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience.

The life experience of the heuristic researcher and the research participants is not a text to be read or interpreted, but a comprehensive story that is portrayed in vivid, alive, accurate, and meaningful language and that is further elucidated through poems, songs, artwork, and other personal documents and creations. The depiction is complete in itself. Interpretation not only adds nothing to heuristic knowledge but removes the aliveness and vitality from the nature, roots, meanings, and essences of experience.

(Moustakas, 1994, p.19)

### *Participant Selection*

The participants in this proposed study were generated from a group participating in the Tree Bear Institute's Nature-Centered Rites of Passage Program. All group members were invited to participate in the research process on a volunteer basis. Full



inclusion in the study was based upon factors of literacy and follow through, in relation to the capacity of participants to produce the necessary data. Efforts were made to support participants when challenged in these factors. Any individuals in the program choosing not to participate in the research process were not be penalized in any way and extra effort was made to support whole group inclusion in the program and avoid a splitting of the group based on research participation.

Participation in this research was designed to benefit participants by enhancing their experiences of the program and by providing opportunities for learning a qualitative research process. Any distinguishing characteristics and demographics of participants remain anonymous.

### *Participants*

The participants for this study included three early adolescent males, ages between 12-14, and one adult male, age 40, acting as a parent-participant. The participants were Caucasian, living in a mix of both suburban and urban settings, and receiving schooling in a regular education non-specified setting. The youth participants were part of a pre-existing social group and the adult participant is a father to one of the youths and a significant male figure for the others. Participants were volunteers, generated from a pool of students that expressed interest and choice to participate in the Tree Bear Institutes' wilderness-centered rites of passage program.

### *Protection of the Rights of Participants*

Participant membership in this research was voluntary. Participation in the wilderness rites of passage program was also voluntary. Parental consent for both program and research participation was obtained by written consent form. Parents and

participants had opportunities to dialogue with the researcher and program staff as well as read the consent form to further support their making an informed decision regarding risks and benefits of participation. Copies of the Cleveland State University approved consent documents are contained in Appendix A.

Measures to protect participant confidentiality were taken. Identifying information on participant related data was coded. Participants' names or other identifying information, including their likenesses in the photographs, were a part of the data collection for this study, but are not reported in the results sections. Access to data was limited to participants and researchers. Physical measures of storing data in a locked file cabinet were taken to secure identifying information, making it inaccessible to others.

### *Data Collection*

The methods of data collection included participant observation, journal entries and photo documentation generated by the participants as led by the researcher, photo elicited interviews, processing groups and field notes. Each method was chosen to holistically address the research questions and provide a rich and thick description of each participant's transformative experience.

### *Participant Observation*

Preissell and Grant (2004) described participant observation as a method of qualitative inquiry that has been used for inquiry since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They stated;

It is a method in which the researcher enters the social world of study, the field, to observe human interaction in that context. Participant observation is a label for research requiring some extent of social participation to document or record the course of ongoing events. The researcher observes through participating in events. (p. 163)

Throughout this dissertation an ongoing systematic collection of data was in place which provided a coherent representation of experience and setting.

Chatterjee (1993) explored researcher as instrument in the participant observation method. This study discussed researcher perception shaping the data collection and its interpretation. These perceptions were proposed to be strongly influenced by the social proximity between researcher and subject. Social proximity determined accessibility in ability to build rapport, gain entry, and interpret information. Bogdewic (1992) discussed the use of field notes as primary in the participant observation method. The utility of field notes is to provide a literal account of what happened in the setting and experience, highlighting process and context. Field notes that are thick and rich in qualitative description include a framework for observation and researcher reflection.

Through the participatory research process of this dissertation, all parties involved were in the role of participant observer. Participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage program were acting as participant observers by making journal entries and taking photo-documentation during the program, then being interviewed after their participation in the program. Further a facilitator-researcher, trained in Gestalt therapy theory, supported the group process and took field notes of the ongoing participant experience, interaction, figural statements, setting, and transformative process. Lastly, the lead researcher-facilitator constructed field notes after each program component. The framework of observation in the field notes was structured to align with the Gestalt therapy theory of the transformative process including: process of experience, awareness, and meaning; figure/ground; cycle of experience; and paradoxical theory of change.

Data collected from participant observation served to answer the following research questions:

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

Participant observation was utilized in several studies that are aligned with the theoretical foundations of this dissertation. Shere (1994) utilized the participant observation method in a case study of a summer transitional program for entering college students. The analyses studied the transition phases of the program from the perspective of van Gennep's rites of passage theory, narrating phases of separation, transition, and reintegration.

Florey (1999) examined the role of meaningful activity in generating a transformative process with children with a history of emotional problems attending a summer camp. Using methods of participant observation and interviewing with 91 children and 18 adults, the study revealed findings of cultural narrative and liminal experience, transmitted values, achievements through activity, valuing nature, ceremony and ritual were meaningful and viewed as transformative for participants.

Eggelston (1994) studied 17 adolescents in a wilderness therapy program utilizing one month of participant observation methods. Findings discussed the merits and pitfalls of the wilderness therapy program for behaviorally problematic and emotionally distressed youth. Thematic findings included problems with target populations, the post-program benefits of healthy living, the role and needs of supervisors, cultural learning and personal development, program duration, and post-program difficulties with regard to dysfunctional home environments. The study concluded that wilderness therapy programs provide a positive alternative and resources of coping for behaviorally problematic and emotionally distressed youth.

#### *Journal Entries*

Throughout the Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage experiences participants made reflective journal entries descriptive of their process of lived and observed experiences, awarenesses, and meaning making. The journal entry process was semi-structured to support the alignment of the journal entries to the research questions. This semi-structuring was accomplished through the instructions given to participants at the beginning of the experience and in specific journaling exercises. The journals served as field notes for the participants/researchers in the examination of their individual perspectives of the wilderness centered rite of passage experience and their transformative processes. As data, these journal entries were treated as descriptive narrative texts utilized for document analyses.

Data collected from journal entries will serve to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Merz (2002) described her process of engaging in continuous reflection through journal writing as a researcher. She emphasized the importance of developing one's own research voice or way of thinking that is not bound by tradition, but instead by the meaningfulness of the experience. She also offered insight into the importance of going beyond the research agenda in order to capture the essences of the participants as a way of understanding. Williams and Wessel (2004), in a study with 48 college students, analyzed journal entries to obtain important feedback on how students learn. Participants wrote reflective journal entries documenting identified learning events and describing their observations, impressions, and reactions to what and how they learned and how they would respond to the same or similar events in the future.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) described the use of journals in their study of personal narrative, a type of autoethnography. They analyzed journals in a social-cultural context as well as an internal and interpretive context. They hold that the distinction between person and culture/experience becomes blurred. People reflect and interpret their experience from a preexisting culturally embedded context.

Richardson (2000) viewed writing as a method of inquiry. In application to the participant/researcher method of this dissertation study, writing was represented as a means of self-exploration and introspection in the context of a research study. The data generated from these writings documents the transforming of self in experience. In the development of awareness, writing becomes a facilitator of change.

#### *Photo Documentation and Photo Elicited Interview*

Collier (1967) developed the Photo Elicitation Interview. In this dissertation, this type of interview/photo documentation began with participants and researchers taking digital photographs of what they found to have significance and meaning in representing their experiences. From this pool of photographs generated in the Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage program by participants and researchers, the participants selected photos to create photo essays. An unstructured interview conducted by the researcher, utilized the participant's photo essay and individual photographs chosen by the researcher to elicit description and interpretation of the participant's process of lived experiences, awarenesses, and meanings.

Data collected from photo documentation and photo elicited interviews answered the following research questions:

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

The model of photo elicitation interview, as utilized in this dissertation research, was adapted from the work of Loeffler (2004). Her design was a qualitative study with 14 participants of a college based outdoor program. The participants brought photographs that had meaning in representing their experiences and then interpreted these photographs during as interview process. The interviewer asked the participants questions about their outdoor experiences including trip memories, the meaning(s) they ascribed to their experience, and the value of the photographs in explaining their experience.

Cronin (1998) studied the use of photos in psychological research. This was accomplished through a critical review of theoretic and therapeutic literature on the meaning and psychological significance of family photographs. She evaluated a series of assumptions underpinning the use of photographs in research and clinical contexts. The assumptions of her study which fit the context of this dissertation study are as follows: (1) photographs contain information and evoke an emotional reaction; (2) the essence of a photograph is its relationship to time which differentiates it from other forms of representation; (3) the use of photographs tends to be grounded in realistic or symbolic representation; (4) the meaning of a photograph arises from a narrative context; (5) photographs can “tell” something about the dynamics of experience and can convey an impression of unity and cohesiveness in experience; (6) photographs are used to create personal histories.



Harper (2002) advocated for the use of photo elicitation since images evoke deeper elements of human experiences than words alone. He also reported alignment with the collaborative/ participatory research method, in that it redefines the essential relationships of research through a reduction of the asymmetry in power between the researcher and participant.

The interviews in this dissertation focused on the photographs, rather than on the research participant. Photo elicitation is a collaborative process whereby the researcher becomes a listener as the participant interprets the photograph for the researcher. This process invites research participants to take the leading role in the interview and to make full use of their expertise. In this dissertation, the collaboration occurred at an even higher level, since the research participants took the photographs themselves.

#### *Processing Group*

This portion of the data collection process was recorded and transcribed, following the Wilderness Rite of Passage activities and the larger research process. The process group experience is best described as combining aspects of both a Focus Group with therapeutic processing of their experiences. Processing groups were also included for member checks, to support authenticity of the research and its presentation.

Data collected from processing groups answered the following research questions:

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

Analyses of group therapy sessions are often used in psychological research.

Hoffman (2005) utilized data from group therapy sessions to compare thematic factors in group psychotherapy experiences of participants who improved and deteriorated. Lepper, Mergenthaler and Erhard (2005) analyzed transcripts of a group therapy session to explore the phenomenon of cohesiveness in treating women with eating disorders. Selman and Demoroset (1984) used a transcript/narrative analysis technique of play therapy sessions to identify interpersonal negotiation strategies of two 9 year old boys with socioemotional difficulties. The strategies were classified using a coding system according to developmental themes.

The process groups included in the design of this dissertation research are similar data collections and analyses to those in the studies reported above, even though the intent of the process groups were to enhance awarenesses and meaning, and not considered group therapy sessions.

Mardiz (2000) described focus groups as group interviews that create multiple lines of communication, allowing for the researcher to observe the interactive processes

that occur among participants. The collectivistic nature of this method can support participants in feeling safe to share their experiences. Participation in the collectivist process supports participants' self awareness and can lead to a deeper commitment to social change.

### *Data Analyses*

Both phenomenological and grounded theory methods were utilized in the data analysis process. Wertz (2005) described a process of data analysis in phenomenological research for counseling psychology. Preparatory operations included the transcription of data, differentiation of description into meaningful units, elimination of redundancy, situating descriptions through coding and identification of themes. Development of attitude is emphasized in developing empathic insight; minimizing bias and judgment; and attending to psychological process in a holistic way inclusive of "bodily, perceptual, emotional, imaginative, linguistic, social, and behavioral processes" (p. 172). Analysis of individual descriptions require distinguishing a baseline from the lived experience being studied, distinguishing parts or constituents in their relevance and interrelationship to the larger experience, and attempting to grasp the essence of the lived experience through imaginative variation. Final operations to grasp individual structures include tracking an adopted theory in relation to the descriptive manifestation of the phenomenon, synthesizing insights into a unifying form, drawing to grounded conclusions, comparison of cases to generate commonalities, and exploring the contextual dependency of psychological structures.

From the Grounded Theory methodology of Glasser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative method was used in the data analysis. Charmaz (1983, 2000) and

Glasser (1978) described this process as a piece by piece coding of data which generates comparisons of codes to data and codes to codes. From these codes, analysis leads to common themes in the pool of data. In detail, a researcher (a) compares different people, (b) compares data from the same person at different points in time, (c) compares incident with incident, (d) compares data with category, and (e) compares a category with other categories.

For the purposes of this dissertation the data was analyzed utilizing phenomenological methods and the constant comparative method of Grounded Theory research, as described above. The recorded data was first transcribed into interview documents. Data was next organized by reviewing each interview and field note individually. In this review descriptive terms, which acted as codings, were generated for each statement and description. Examples of experience, awareness, and meaning were also identified and labeled accordingly. These coded statements and descriptions were then separated and organized by program activity component. These units of description were considered in relation to commonalities and difference in their descriptive coding and narrative substance from which the representative themes began to emerge from the data. Meaningful units of description began taking form.

This data analysis process was similar to figure/ground in Gestalt therapy theory. The emergent themes were figures emerging from the background of data. Interest deepened and awareness increased as the units of description become clearer and fuller. This motivated engagement in further rounds of analysis and energized the ongoing process of data exploration. After multiple reviews, considerations, and comparisons of these descriptive units and related themes, they were clustered with relevance to the case

narratives. Following this portion of the analysis, a list of themes was made and compared across program activity components to identify interrelationships, distinguishing continuous emergent themes.

Attention was then given to researcher field notes to begin the written narratives describing each program activity component in its facilitated process and detail. The themes from the descriptive units were considered and had influence as the written narratives were developed. Once this descriptive portion was completed the descriptive units and their themes from the participant interviews were added to the case narrative structure. This brought the voices of the participants to the narratives, giving essence to the phenomenon of the lived experiences and transformative processes. This began with inclusion of descriptive examples of experience that facilitated awareness, awareness that initiated a process of meaning making. Further themes and their descriptive units were incorporated into the related case narrative to enrich representation. Finally, Gestalt therapy theory became the unifying form of the narrative case studies as they reached completion. Inclusion of aspects of Gestalt therapy theory provided a grounded theory, gave context and meaning to the psychological processes in transformation, and directed insight and explanation to the phenomenon of transformative process through wilderness-centered rites of passage. As the descriptive case narratives reached completion, they were then organized for presentation of results in chapter 4 by order of the research questions and by the chronological order of the activities of the wilderness-centered rites of passage program.

## Conclusion

The intention in utilizing a participatory phenomenological methodology with the methods of journaling, photo elicited interview, and a processing group was to develop rich and descriptive data. This allowed for the generation of program component case narratives that chronicle both participants' multiplicity and unifying experiences. This research process intended to leave openness for participant individuality while at the same time seeking common ground.

The next chapter presents the results, or synthesis, of the data from the multiple sources, in a case narrative format organized around the components of the wilderness rites-of-passage program.

## CHAPTER IV

### DESCRIPTIVE NARRATIVE AND DATA ANALYSES

The following chapter, Descriptive Narrative and Data Analyses, contains a descriptive phenomenology of the participants' transformative processes in the wilderness-centered rites of passage experience. Chapter 4 first includes the application of research methods and general details as related to the wilderness-centered rites of passage program and participants. Then research questions Q1 and Q7 are answered through thematic exploration of participants' prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences. The next section is a series of case narratives organized by program activity component. These case narratives are designed to answer research questions Q2 through Q6, by thematically exploring the experiences, awarenesses, and meanings made by participants. Each case narrative includes a description of the experienced program component and the emergent themes of transformative process from data analyses, supported by descriptive quotes from participant interviews and details from researcher observation. This structure is designed to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness-centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

Q7: What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing the outcomes of research questions 2-6?

### Applied Research Methods

The wilderness-centered rites of passage experience, as documented in this dissertation, consisted of an all day group experience and a partial day individual experience. The group experience was conducted at Pebble Ledge Farm and included the following program components: orientation to the program and research, drumming circle, hiking and snowball fight, horse facilitated challenge, building a hay bale fort, hiking to the river and ice breaking, and receiving a medicine pouch. The individual partial day experience was conducted at a local wilderness park and included the



following program components: hiking, receiving elemental learnings and reflections, river element, rock element with solo in a shallow cave, and tree element. The participants were three early adolescent males, 12-14 years of age, and one adult male. The youth participants were part of a pre-existing social group and the adult participant is a father to one of the youths and a significant male figure for the others. Program components are explained in detail as part of the case study format included in the body of this chapter.

Quotes from the journals, participant interviews, as well as data collected from participant observation, were relied upon for illustration of the participants' experiences. The participatory process of the research methodology was consistent throughout the program and research process. In the group program, participants became aware of the research intention through pre-program preparation. Data collection was transparent to and inclusive of participants during the program. Each youth participant was interviewed within one month post group experience. Their written journal entries were minimally useful for data analyses, but played a supportive role in the photo-elicited interview process. The adult parent-participant supported group facilitation and acted as a participant-observer and was also interviewed post group experience. He was not a participant in the individual experience. An additional Gestalt-trained facilitator-researcher assisted with data collection during the group experience by taking descriptive notes on significant quotes and details of participant experiences and group process. Descriptive notes were also taken during and after programs and interviews by the lead researcher-facilitator.

The design of the wilderness-centered rites of passage experience, for both group and individual programs, was planned to be representative of rites of passage processes, of wilderness therapy, and inclusive of Gestalt therapy theories. The rites of passage process was represented in this program through the introduction to unfamiliar experiences, esoteric knowledge, and transcendent life experiences. Wilderness therapy was represented in this program through the experiences of naturally occurring challenges, emersion in nature, and transformative experiences. Gestalt therapy was represented in this program since the research was experiential, organic in design, and had a holistic focus of the intra-psychic, intersubjective, and relational fields.

#### Prior Beliefs, Contexts, and Experiences

This initial section of qualitative analyses results describes the participants' experiences, awarenesses, and meanings prior to the wilderness centered rites of passage program. Both research questions Q1 and Q7 explored the influence of participants' prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences upon intentions, expectations, and outcomes both in the research and the wilderness centered rites of passage. Q1 and Q7 are repeated here to help distinguish them from the remaining questions and case narratives.

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q7: What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing the outcomes of research questions 2-6?

The responses to these questions were answered together by utilizing participant quotations woven into a narrative. This same format was also used to answer the remaining research questions pertaining to the transformative process and the wilderness-centered rites of passage. The resulting narrative identified themes descriptive of participants' prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences that may have influenced the research data and their perceptions of the wilderness-centered rites of passage program.

### ***Prior Experience and Familiarity with Nature***

Participants thematically spoke to having **prior experience and familiarity with nature**. During the interviews, participants discussed their prior experiences in detail and in combination with evocative expression of emotion. In the following statement a participant described his enjoyment of positive prior experience in nature.

“The past times I’ve been out there I’ve been hiking with my family, but what I enjoy more is climbing something where it’s a physical activity out in the woods. And I really just also like sometimes sitting on a log and just thinking about my life, what I’m going to do next, what I have done and things that are going on in the present day.

Another participant described his experience of emersion in wilderness, having positively cited an experience of isolation in the pristine environment.

“It was pretty cool being on all of that many acres of land with no one else there... It was just pretty cool to know that you were the only ones who had been walking on that place for maybe a couple of years. You were the first people and that you were all alone out there. It felt pretty cool. ...It was so quiet out there. I guess listening to the birds chirping, it felt like

you were the only one who ever walked there, like you were going to be the only who ever walked there.”

Another participant described his experience white water rafting and the excitement the experience evoked.

“It’s very action packed, you always have to look around a rock or a small water fall. My experience, we had about 10 to 20 rafts in the water, and we all went down...I’m not sure which river it was, but we all crowded around, going off maybe like 5 foot water falls. Down rocks and it was with my family. My dad and brother and friend... and just the feeling. It’s constant motion and constant excitement around the trees and the water splashing in your face.”

One participant described a prior experience in which he made meaning in reflecting on the metaphor of the cycle of life, including generativity to death.

“In my life I make balance as I treat the animals and humans and creatures and formations in helping them grow and helping other things die that need to die at a certain time. You sort of give them space yet you help them live a little longer then you put them down and they die. Sort of like if you find a baby bird in the forest and it has a broken wing you feed it and you make a hole and when it dies then you bury it then you cover it with dirt, then you put grass over it then you cover it with flowers. Then you say what you think it has gone through and what you think made it appear to the earth and hopefully it will have a second life. It was sad. It was a baby robin and it fell out of the tree in our front yard and fell into

our driveway. We picked it up and it had a broken neck and probably internal damage. So we gave it food so it could have one last eating. Then it died in my hands. So we buried it and put flowers, then watered the flowers, so it could decompose faster.”

The adult participant commented on his thematic perceptions of participants’ **familiarity and enthusiasm for experience in nature** which supported their willingness to participate in the program and research.

“So there’s this familiarity with nature, even if they had not been in that place, the way that they relate to outdoor, wilderness, natural environment seems to come naturally to them regardless of the location. They seem to step in and sink into the environment like that. The fact that we were going to be outside. ...They really enjoy being outside and adventuring together.”

While participants had positive expressions of their overall participation, they also made statements that present themes of **overcoming resistance** and a **change of perception toward the program**.

#### ***Overcoming Resistance and a Change of Perception Toward the Program***

“At first I was sort of like I didn’t want to be here, I wanted to be somewhere else. But then it turned out it was going to be fun. I realized it would be fun when [they] were there and I saw the horses and I knew we’d be doing something fun.”

One participant made a statement of their increasing excitement as they recognized their preconceived notions of the program were not aligned with the actual activities.

“Really what I thought the day would be, ...it would be outside the entire day and sitting out in the woods, just being quiet and listening. ...It went from being very ‘alright great, we’re going to go sit in the woods and listen and be by the fire’ to ‘oh cool we’re building forts! [to] We’re having snowball fights!’ Very action packed, very exciting!”

The adult participant described perceptions of the process the participants experienced in overcoming their initial resistance as they moved into nature and began to participate.

“Even if there’s some resistance on the way to that, like [he] was quick to tell you how much he hates to hike but he has so much fun once we’re there. So it’s interesting to see that push-pull struggle thing going. ...But I guess the part of the experience that stood out for me was how they lit up once they were out.”

Throughout the interviews participants made statements of their beliefs and perceptions of nature. They made statements that described contextual themes of experiences of the **calming stillness** and **peace** they achieved in experiences of emersion in nature to the **high excitement** activity as one participant described previously about going white water rafting.

### *Calming Stillness, Peace, Excitement*

“It’s much quieter, but when you pay close attention there are actually thousands of noises and it’s very soothing, such as the rain, the wind, the rustle of a leaf, the crickets or the birds chirping.”

Another participant described the sense of calm and quiet in nature as an escape from the stress of their usual life experiences.

“I think it is a way to let go of your stress and your normal life. This is like your second life. ...Quiet, usually, birds and nature, yeah both. It feels quiet and peaceful and sometimes it feels boring, most of the time it feels nice though. It’s not really quiet in real life, unless you’re asleep.”

Participants made further statements in which themes emerged about their perceptions and experiences of **freedom from distractions** which provides a **present-centered orientation** when in a natural environment. A participant described a sense of reprieve from thought clutter in the quiet of Nature.

### *Freedom from Distractions and Present-Centered Orientation*

“Quietness, that there’s not really any distractions there and most thoughts ...like what you’re going to do the next day, or what you’ve done in the past ...you can’t really remember those. They’re blanked out of your mind and it’s just what’s going now.”

Another participant described the activity as not only freedom from distraction, but also a perceived pleasurable isolation of the natural world.

“I like to hike and find a dark place to sit, like underneath a tree or something. And then I come out and build a fort out of sticks... Joy. There’s no technology or civilization there. It’s just animals and life. It’s like you’re the only one on the planet. No one else is around you. I feel like I’m the only one and no one else is bothering me. I go off into space, there’s no distractions.”

These thematic sentiments of **peace and presence in the isolation providing a freedom from distraction** are further echoed and elaborated in the following participant statement:

“You just think about sometimes you are just so busy. And now just sitting here, you have nothing to do you are completely in the present. You are not thinking about anything else. Just about the now that is going on right now. It feels as if there is nothing at all going on around you. ...There is so much activity and still it is so silent. You really have to be quiet to notice it, to just sit in peace.”

One participant made a comparative description that showed a preference for outdoor, natural experience over the indoor, urban experience. He expressed a contextual awareness of socio-historical trends.

“Because it either gets really boring with all the electronics and stuff and you want to have a more primitive form of entertainment. Instead of using modern technology and having video games for entertainment, you are going outside. Ever since man was started, people would use outside for fun. Now people use more indoors for fun and so it has sort of



become something that is not even around anymore. It feels good. It feels like I am outside. Well I am. But it feels like I am freer than when I am in the city. ...When I am in the city a lot, everything is around you so it feels like you are tired and you can't do as many things. But if you are outside it feels like I can do anything. It helps you breathe better, fresh air and stuff. Exercise, fresh air, and you get to be with Nature.”

### ***Stewardship and Reverence for Nature***

The themes of **stewardship and reverence for nature** were both addressed in the wilderness-centered rites of passage program and were also contextual in the participants' prior beliefs and perceptions. The statements made in interviews thematically described this theme in combination of an environmental and spiritual values context.

“It's old and we needed to be respectful, to respect where things may grow, because those are the bits and pieces of life. ...I think it would be very important to hear that because it is sort of the golden rule. Respect others the way you want to be treated. So if you disrespect nature in some way it will disrespect you. ...If you respect nature, in a way it will let flowers will grow, animals will come out, grass will most likely lean to you as you walk by at a really small amount. ...It feels protected so it looks up to you to protect it and keep it from being hurt by other things.”

This participant made meaning in application to life experience in his statement regarding **stewardship and reverence for Nature**.

“Respect others the way you want to be respected and in your own house or family you want to respect others so they would help you with your troubles and you will help them with their troubles.”

This participant deepened the theme of **stewardship and reverence for Nature** when he discussed his perception of his learning experience in relation to the environment and responsibility for stewardship of nature.

“Yeah, well there are too many things. So much pollution and stuff and most people don’t take the time to worry about it. They just pass on by. [They] teach us there was this stuff; it takes millions of years to grow a couple of inches for some of these plants. That they are out there and if you touch it, all that work will be gone. So I think that taught us a sense that these are living things, this is our earth, we must take care of it.”

Belief in environmental stewardship is furthered in the definitive statement this participant made.

“Well, it feels like it’s your responsibility, even though you may, like (they) said, that it’s their property, but it’s not really their property. It’s the animals, and the organisms and the vegetation that lives there for many, many years. And it’s your responsibility to take care of it.”

A final context that may have influenced the experience of participants and the outcome of research is the role of the adult participant. He spoke to his potential influence in the following example:

“When your child goes to somebody else’s house and I’m not around he behaves one way and when we go to the same house and I am

there, he behaves differently, just because I'm present. And I didn't get the sense...I'm not sure how much my presence influenced the behavior but all the behavior seemed very familiar to me...and in line with the objective for the work too."

He further spoke to his own efforts, as he was conscious of his potential to have influence, both as a participant in and observer of these processes.

"I definitely was really happy. I thought it was beautiful to watch. I noticed my proximity to their experience. 'When did I show up being more directive, reigning them in a little bit sometimes?' I did notice that and I was consciously trying to stay out of the way but in the picture even if it's out of the frame."

#### Case Narratives of the Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage Program

This section of the chapter contains case narratives which highlight the activity components of the Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage Program. The case narratives are presented in two portions, first the activity components from the group program, then activities from the individual program. The structure of these case narratives consists of a narrative description of the participants' experiences of the activity, through which a thematic narrative of the participants' transformative processes are interwoven. Each case study represents the descriptive and lived experiences of participants, their awarenesses and meanings generated from what they experienced. The activities are described both in design as well as in the perceived and observed experience of participants. The themes of transformative process are presented throughout these descriptions. Quotes from

participant interviews and researcher observation are utilized to bring concreteness to theme and description. These case narratives answer research questions Q2 through Q6:

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

Beyond answering the research questions, the group program case narratives include related aspects of Gestalt theory. These aspects of Gestalt theory relate to the experiential activity within the wilderness-centered rites of passage program design and serve as a descriptive lens into the transformative process of the participants. The individual program case narratives further represent and emphasize aspects of rites of passage, focusing both on direct experience and metaphor within the experience related to the rites of passage model as supporting transformative process.

### *Group Program*

The group program was intended to focus on emersion and experience within nature. Moreover, the program sought to provide an adventurous and relational experience accompanied by opportunity for self-reflection and insight. The program

design took into consideration the Gestalt therapy theory. The group experience was conducted at Pebble Ledge Farm and supported by the farm owners, Jackie and Herb Stevenson, who are also Gestalt program facilitators and trainers. Jackie and Herb are people that steward and cultivate the sacredness of this land. Their presence here nurtures this sacred space with intentionality, mindfulness, and ceremony. Many people come to Pebble Ledge Farm seeking growth, sanctuary, healing, clarity, and a fuller sense of self.

The group program included the following components: orientation to the program and research, drumming circle, hiking and snowball fight, horse facilitated challenge, building a hay bale fort, hiking to the river and ice breaking, and receiving a medicine pouch.

### *Orientation*

The initial program introduction and participant orientation was supported by Jackie and Herb and they provided insight into the land as sacred Nature. They supported discussion on environmental caretaking, making minimal impact, safety and logistical issues related to being at Pebble Ledge Farm. They were able to engage in discussion bridging environmental practice and spiritually centered concepts. Participants were further instructed on the research process and their individual roles as participant-researchers. They were provided with journals and discussed photo-documentation. Lastly, participants were informed of the program agenda and given the opportunity for questions and clarifications. They made affirmative statements of understanding their roles and the program logistics.

### *Drumming Circle*

The first activity was a whole group drumming circle. All participants had familiarity and prior experience with drumming and were easily engaged. Initially, participants chose a drum, and then began drumming fast and chaotically. The facilitator redirected the group to drum a heartbeat. This was intended to center the group and move from chaotic interaction to a more intentional and methodic focus. Throughout the day, the centering activity served as a point of reference to gauge and adapt the behaviors and focus of the group members.

We then began story telling and guided meditation for raising and connecting with spirit and the natural world as narrated by the facilitator. The group continued their use of the drum throughout this activity. They were instructed to use the drum to make expressions of gratitude and to set intentions for themselves throughout the day. Participants next began to improvise and expand from the heartbeat rhythm. This type of group drumming encouraged group cohesiveness, while giving each participant the opportunity to hold the group attention while being expressive. A harmonically tuned Crystal Bowl was introduced into the ensemble. This attracted the attention of participants and each was given an opportunity to ask questions and to try sensing and manipulating the sound and vibration from the bowl. One participant described his experience of the drumming, responding favorably and reflecting on the group process.

“You said that at first we should drum and get warmed up for the day and that’s why we did it. The glass bowl, that if you rub something on, it makes a cool noise and humming sound. It was a crystal bowl that reverberated out. We made beats. I think it’s fun. It’s cool to just make

music. It's not really fun if you do it by yourself; I like to do it with other people, four or more, as many as possible. ...They start at the same time and one person does one part and the other does the other. All you need is a person and a drum and you can do it."

### ***Identity and Leadership***

One participant had significant prior experience with drumming, and this experience was expressive of his sense of **identity**. He took a **leadership** role in the drumming, moving to each person, leaning in and emphasizing his drum beat.

"Since I was three years old I've been banging on drums, on sticks, on tables and I've always had the sense that I was meant to be a drummer. And in fact today I am a drummer. I play in a band and we have a lot of fun and I think that was what I was meant to do." He added, "It's always been a little habit of mine to go around and try and help everybody, get them into the melody, getting them to be a part of it. If they're struggling, I will to try to help them."

This participant then put many of the drums together and made a larger instrument he played with sticks. This influenced others to beat more than one drum. They had a little ownership and territory issue as all drums available began to be used. This was easily defused with reminders of sharing and mutual support for everyone. The facilitator ensured that all participants were given attention and opportunity to express themselves as the focal point and dominant drum of the ensemble.

### ***Unity and Holism***

Thematically within this experience of drumming was **Unity** and **Holism**. Through drumming, participants developed awareness and made meaning of their experience in the drum circle as unifying and holistic as evidenced by the following quotations.

“We started off and every one was very separate. And then as you start the beat, another person would join in and soon we were all making this rhythm together, having fun, laughing...and it kind of united us.”

These thematic aspects of transformative process were further expanded on as this participant made meaning as he applied the awareness of drumming to lived experience, as he related the unity of the drum play to unifying people in action.

“I think drumming is ...it’s a rhythm of everyone. With one person you cannot make a sound, cannot make a contrasting rhythm. That’s what’s great about the drum; it’s just like in real life. One person standing alone, doesn’t matter that much, but a united people...coming together to do one thing in a partnership makes a beautiful sound, as on the drum.”

Further evidencing the transformative process in the drumming circle experience, a participant narrated the group’s developing awareness and meaning-making in application to the range of rhythm in the drumming experience as a perceived metaphor for life process.

“Yes I thought that was awesome. It was loud... having a steady beat in life. It’s like taking your life slow and not hurrying up, making things count. When you take it slow, you get to actually see things and



when you take it fast, you miss things that you wouldn't think would be there.”

Throughout these case narratives, thematic threads interconnect the ongoing transformative process of participants. As highlighted above, the emergent continuous themes of **leadership** and **identity** were evident in the descriptive narrative of the drumming circle. These themes are revisited and expanded upon throughout these case narratives. Further, in the drumming circle component, **Self- Expression** can be cited as another emergent continuous theme of transformative process. Wheeler (2002) described self-expression in a Gestalt developmental model as giving voice to the intrapsychic and lived experience. Drumming is described as a non-verbal language, giving expression to the feeling and emotion of the drummer (Laukka and Gabrielsson, 2000).

**Self- Expression** through drumming was evidenced in a participant's quotation.

#### Self-Expression

“I really love to drum and connect with nature. I usually go to drum when I am feeling angry or sad or like any bad emotion or sometimes good ones. I like to drum when I feel so good, so this was an opportunity to do that. I think I really expressed how I felt toward the stuff that's been going on right now that I feel.”

Lastly the continuous emergent themes of **Energetic Range and Container** and **Aggression** were relevant in this case narrative. Energetic range and container as a theme is defined in terms of the participants' level of activity and engagement. The participants may be described as having a range between low and high energy. Container serves both as self-regulation for participants and as an intervention in facilitation. Aggression in

terms of drive, motivation, activity, forcefulness, and verbal and physical acting out is something to which energetic range and container may be applied. Energetic range and container was evidenced in a quote by the adult participant.

***Energetic Range and Container and Aggression***

“It was cool to see ... when the drumming was happening and how they were sharing the drums and switching the drums. The experiences inside the house were different from outside. When they were outside they didn’t have to channel or contain energy so much. They could be as big and loud as they wanted whereas inside there was still that energy but they couldn’t express it the same and it definitely came out in the drumming. There was a lot of aggressive drumming. There was some volume and some speed. But it wasn’t just that. You know they seemed to have range. There was more range in the music than there was in the outdoor play. You know, they were able to sing softly indoors.”

Energetic range and container is elaborated further when considering both served as a facilitation tool and a naturally occurring process of the participants. When it was up to the facilitators to vary the size of the container, sometimes the architecture of the program did the containing along with the facilitator, as in the drumming circle. Other times, which will be exemplified in this study, energetic range and container served in self-regulation and modulation of experience by the participants. Such was the case with feelings of aggression.

Aggression in Gestalt Therapy theory is seen as a biological function that serves to support and drive the assimilation of psychological process (Perls, 1947). Thematically

throughout this dissertation, aggression became an integral component of the transformative process. As in this component, it served in supporting the assimilation of identity, self-expression, and group unity. Participants' actions and expressions of aggression were experienced within and reflected upon as an experiential phenomenon that catalyzed awareness and meaning.

As introduced in this drumming case study, several of the themes reemerged throughout the program. These continuous emergent themes played an ongoing role in describing the transformative process of the participants. From the drumming, participants made the transition from the house to the outdoors and began their next activity, a wilderness hike.

#### *Hike and Snowball Fight*

The hike and snowball fight component of the program was intended to begin the process of emersion in nature, which was accomplished. Further, the participants' playfulness and excitement emerged and was highly evident in this portion of the program. One participant described their playful emersion process as they viewed photos and made statements about their experiences.

“Snowball fight and a hike! We got pelted by snowballs and also we got to see how the trees live in the forest when it's cold. They are bare when it's cold. He is the king of the hill on the tree stump. We're taking cover from the snow balls.”

The boys began running ahead of facilitators, throwing snowballs, wrestling, and going into the woods off the path. They began hiding from each other and the adults,

running deeper into the woods, toward a more fragile environmental area. A choice was made to intervene, as the conduct of the boys was not aligned with having human presence in the fragile ecosystem toward which they were directed. Facilitators pursued the participants as they were hiding, and running deeper into the woods. Facilitators rounded them up, which required seeing them, giving chase, and some strong verbal prompting. Participants were directed back to the trail and re-informed of expectations. Discussion focused on togetherness, respecting the land, following directions, staying on the trail until otherwise instructed. They experienced the natural consequences of not being able to enter more fragile areas on the land at that time until they could conduct themselves in a less rowdy manner.

### ***Energetic Range and Container***

The hike along the forest trail continued, leading back and forth between the forest and the pasture fence line. The redirections further evidenced the continuous theme of **energetic range and container** as they were being rounded and contained to the path after excessive rowdy and expansive behavior. Experience of the energetic range and container reflected the participants' energy level and behavior. It also reflected the facilitator establishing boundaries with participants, based on a need for safety, keeping participants in sight and protecting the pristine nature. After about 10 minutes of demonstrating contained behavior during hiking, participants were allowed to go into the woods and began an intense snowball fight, an experience returning to the other polarity of highly energetic behavior. One participant described his experience of heightened energy.

”The adrenaline. That’s why I like paintball and air-soft and all that other extreme stuff, it’s really fun. It feels really powerful I guess and exciting. I feel braver... like when I get hit with a snowball, it won’t hurt as much and I just want to kind of run out there and have fun.”

Participants focused on the father/facilitator as their main target and attempted to wrestle him to the ground several times as well. They used the natural setting to shield themselves and allow them to get closer than open ground would allow. This process is articulated by a participant in the following quote:

“We were all scrambling to get away from (him). We were having a snowball fight. It was very exciting. We were all yelling at each other, like we were in the military, like we were at war or something. It was pretty cool. We were hiding behind the trees as if it was a bunker and it was just a very excited moment!”

When participants reached a shielded spot, they quieted and settled for a few minutes, observed the scene, and strategically planned. In the sheltered areas they were quieter, with more observation and whispered interactions among themselves, having less movement, often laying on the ground. Again participants’ experiences were at the other polarity of lower energetic behavior, as stated in this next quote:

“Well we had tried to get ahead and it was a nice little peaceful spot...perfect, it was hollowed out, the inside of a tree. It’s roots were a perfect spot to be hiding. We just took a second to think about how we were going to make our next move using the land and what we had.”

Throughout this program component, the participants were back and forth between these polarities in the range of high and low energetic behaviors. Their spirits were high with laughter and loud expression, especially when participants were throwing snowballs and wrestling each other.

### ***Adaptation***

A theme specific to this experience is the participants' **adaptation** to the natural environment. Adaptation is also a strong theme in developmental literature. In the Gestalt literature adaptation is termed creative adaptation (Lee and Wheeler, 1996). Also adaptation has been considered as an aspect of resiliency (Rak, C. and Patterson, L. 1996). Participants described their adaptation to nature as using nature as a tool and as being able to adapt their activity to the natural environment. These aspects of adaptation are evidenced in the several quotations. First a participant described his adaptive experience as he viewed a photo of himself.

“This is me being attacked by (him). Again, here we were using falling timber as a perfect hiding spot or bunker to again...using the land for everything. Again here using the land to try and hide.”

Next a participant discussed their resourcefulness in making adaptations, fully using what was in the natural environment.

“We took the fallen trees and hid behind them and used them as bunkers. We took the snow and used it as our ammo or snowballs. We used the tall grass as a hiding place or a fallen or standing tree to hide or attack. Everything was based off the environment there. We would hide underneath leaves and jump out at each other. Just everything was using

the environment and nature and all the living or even dead, the eroding things that were there. We didn't have to bring anything. We didn't have to make anything. It was all there for us."

Lastly a participant reflected on their process of learning through experience as he adapted to using the land to meet his needs.

"I think it was fun. It was definitely a learning experience. As if we depended on the land and we couldn't make anything. We couldn't use any of our tools. We had to adapt the hiding behind a low tree instead of having a metal bunker in front of us. We had to make our own snowballs. We had to make use of the land and of from what it gave us."

As seen in the above statements participants were able to recognize their capacity for resourcefulness as they experienced the intensive activity and were immersed in the natural environment.

### ***Challenge and Collaborative Problem Solving***

The participants' interpersonal play and the natural environment both presented inherent **challenge** in the activities. **Challenge** and **collaborative problem solving** were emergent continuous themes of the case narratives. The challenge in the natural environment is represented in the following quotations.

"I think it was hard, because there were things you couldn't see, so you trip over them. Limbs, stumps, holes that you fall in. That made it more difficult. We would hide behind fallen trees, burrow into crevices to take cover. It was actually quite fun!"

This theme is further stated in this next quote as a participant described the experience he had while viewing a photograph.

“In this picture we were trying to climb down...figuring out how to climb down this hill. There were lots of stones and obstacles that we had to try and figure our way around using a partnership.”

Not all challenges were met with successful problem solving efforts, as is related here:

“That’s me being sneaky in a sarcastic way. I was trying to hide behind the tree, but my dad saw me, and started throwing snowballs at us. So it really didn’t work. ... Here, we’re hiding behind the fallen limbs and trees and bark. We are taking cover because we’re being pelted.”

A further example was offered by the adult participant as he described his perceptions of the process of the challenges met and collaborative problem solving efforts made by participants.

“When we were snow ball fighting against the three of them, they each had their own strengths and skills. They were paying attention to what each of the other people were good at... and identifying it for themselves, or identifying it for each other.”

In the following quotation a participant described their awareness and meaning from their process of having overcome challenge through collaborative problem solving in this portion of the research program.

“Yeah, here we were hiding behind a tree, getting ready to run, planning, talking about what we were doing and what we were about to do



and do it in unity... . Well, two heads is better than one. Many heads, many ideas. You know, they're just all trying to say that the more people you have the more ideas you have and the better ideas you can create. I think it helped us to learn to help each other. How to give advice to other people. ...How to help us work together and I had to overcome obstacles not just using our way, but using all of our ways, compromising."

### ***Aggression***

As easily imagined, the snowball fight portion of this activity was further representative of **aggression** as a continuous emergent theme in the transformative process of these participants. They were relentless in their efforts throughout the snowball fight. The adult participant expressed his perception of the aggressive experience of the others.

"They love combat. They love it with each other. Like when we first started out on the hike, how they were all over each other in a huge aggressive dog pile. ...For 3 little kids to be running straight at you. ...They love it too. They love nothing better than to dog pile me, because they don't have that experience with other men in their lives. The only safe way to try and experiment and test all that physicality stuff out is in the doing. And doing it to each other is one thing but doing to somebody that they know could turn them upside down and still having the courage to do it."

Gestalt Therapy Theory more recently expands the view of aggression as energy and excitement arising from contact. A lack of ground in the experience of contact further

fuels aggression. In this context, Lobb (2007) suggests that aggression serves to seek the security, satisfaction, and fulfillment of relationship between self and other/self and environment.

Throughout this portion of the program, as lead facilitator I struggled with my own level of engagement, clearly wanting to support their experience and deepening of contact, but not wanting to become another challenge the participants felt a need to overcome. After this segment in which the group had expended a lot of energy, the hike continued back to the farm house. There the group was given lunch and some down time to recharge. They were prepared for the next activity during this period: working with the horse. They were advised to get more grounded and centered as there would be a need for them to have a more mindful and settled presence around the horse.

### *Horse Facilitated Challenge*

This component began with the addition of another facilitator, Jackie Stevenson, our host on the farm and a person with training and experience in equine facilitated programs, therapy, and interventions. We then engaged in discussion and logistics related to safety, conduct in the paddock, and approaching and interacting with the horse. Dialogue continued about focusing on mindfulness during each action taken through the experience and to about observing and interpreting the horse's behavior. Participants were given the opportunity to approach the horse, Rojo, before engaging in the challenge activities. They were slow, cautious, and gentle. They made attempts to feed her and get her to take hay from their hands, then petting and hugging her as the rapport became more comfortable.

### ***Energetic Range and Container***

In the participants' approach of and interactions with the horse, the continuous emergent theme of **Energetic Range and Container** was evident. A participant made the following statement as he viewed a photo of them walking toward the horse for the first time. He expressed their process of awareness and meaning as he practiced containment and kept his behavior in the lower energetic range.

“Here (they are) walking towards Rojo and I’m standing back, because I wanted to be careful. I wanted to make sure that I wasn’t going to be hurt. I believed she was going to be nice to us. I was calm; slow, calm, and steady. Because I stayed back and didn’t rush to pet her or try to make her do something that she didn’t want to do. She looks like she knows me better than the other two boys and she feels comfortable being around me.”

As one participant viewed a series of photos of this experience, he expressed their transformative process of experience, awareness and meaning in having energetic range and container in approaching and interacting with Rojo. This represented a learning process from direct experience that was broadened to additional general interactive experiences of the same nature.

“Here we’re getting instructions, how to enter the horse’s presence, how to walk in very carefully, how to calm ourselves down. How to observe it, how to see if this animal would like to be petted if she wants to be fed. How you should approach her.”

He expresses his awareness of self, other, and environment in relation to the energetic range and container, and in having a new and unfamiliar experience.

“This is where we were all hyped up and we had to calm down and enter the quiet zone for the horse so that we would not endanger ourselves and the safety of others by being over excited. ...It was interesting because I’m not used to being around these large animals so it was very..., it was a learning moment for me. I’m usually very hyped up and like to be very active and this was calmer. Asking the horse’s opinion, seeing what she wants you to do, not what you want to do.”

This participant made meaning of his experience and awareness as he shared the learning he has had:

“Well an animal reacts how you react, so I feel if you go in there and you’re running around and yelling and jumping up and down, the horse or any animal, but a horse in this case will get nervous, will tense up, will act fidgety and may feel scared of being attacked and could react in a negative way toward you. So you really got to...and if you’re calm, then you can...the horse I feel or any animal...will calm down and feel more secure.”

Participants were then given two challenge activities both involving group participation and getting Rojo to move in adherence to their intention. By design the Horse experience related to the continuous emergent themes of **challenge and collaborative problem solving**.

### ***Challenge and Collaborative Problem Solving***

Participants experienced theme in their efforts to approach and interact with the horse and in their efforts toward accomplishment in the following designed challenges. The first activity was a challenge to communicate, lead, and follow. Participants stood shoulder to shoulder, with one participant as a brain and voice and the other two as physical movement. Their challenge was getting Rojo to move from one part of the paddock to another. The second activity was to design and set up an obstacle course, then as a team to lead Roho through it. One participant described their experience of this process of collaboration in the following descriptive statement.

“I felt that we were in control. ...We made the way, showing her where to go, but she sometimes drifted off away from the course and we had no control over her coming back. We tried to lure her back, she came and then she went again. It was her choice, but she did complete it. So I felt it was a partnership.”

In the second activity there was a critical incident that impacted the group significantly. Roho was pulled hard by a participant in an effort to make her move. She did not move, but shed tears that they all noticed together. The participants all then responded to Roho affectionately, being apologetic, and making efforts to comfort her. This experiential process is described in the following quote by the adult participant.

“So they were adjusting themselves in order to fit Rojo’s experience, which doesn’t always happen. They gave up on force. I think that’s what it was. That they tried force, you know by pulling and that wasn’t working. And that was more physical force, and there’s the

energetic force that they abandoned as well and then surrendered to Rojo's experience and shifted their own in accordance with that."

After this incident there was a change in their interaction style, in that it became more collaborative, and they acted more gently and in a relational manner toward Rojo. After the change, they were able to accomplish the challenge of leading her through the obstacle course.

### ***Relational Field***

This second challenge experience facilitated a transformative process in the participants that is thematic of their experience within the Relational Field (Wheeler, 2002), an aspect of Gestalt theory inclusive of awareness of self and other and the transformational process of an I-It to an I-Thou relationship (Buber, 1914/1958; Hycner, 1990). This transformative process was evident in the following quote from a participant in describing their experience facilitating awareness and meaning.

"It was really disappointing. We felt like 'wow', we're not in complete control of this animal. She has her own feelings. She has her own emotions. Her own wants and needs and we're taking that away from her, partially, by saying 'you must come with us, here.' When we tug on the rope, it's like we're bossing her, telling her when to eat, telling her when to sleep, telling her where to go. I felt that was pretty controlling so then after that we stopped and we used different methods of calming, petting, stroking and then asking her what she wanted to do."

In this experience the participants again made **collaborative problem solving** efforts to meet a **challenge** that did not quite work out the way they expected. After the

experience, they were able to rethink their efforts, adapt their strategy, and try new methods. The adult participant put it this way:

“Yeah they grew some balls on that one, yeah, and it didn’t work.

They had to muster up the courage to try something that did not work.

And I think that that really helped to frame for them ...I’m not sure that

they had to continue to muster up courage because that seemed to be

around the physicality of it. But they had to keep coming back with

‘alright then...if not that then what?’”

When they finished the challenge activities, they made efforts to care for and further comfort Rojo. This is described in the following participant quote:

“That’s when we were about to leave the horse. We gave it a

blanket and a lot of hay. We did it so she could be happy, satisfied and not

hungry. And we could be happy by helping Rojo to be happy, and

everyone could be happy.”

In this component the relational field is a significant theme for the participants’ transformative process. Development of a caring I-Thou relationship, attending to a contact boundary (Crocker, 1988), and experiencing emotion and empathy were thematic in evidencing a transformative process. The emotional and empathic experience, as well as a shift in perception of relationship from I-It to I-Thou relationship was evidenced in the following quote.

“Taking care of the horse, Rojo. She was small for a horse, she was

loving. She was scared because we were not taking our time, trying to

police her and force her to come. Yes, and she started to cry. I never knew

that an animal could cry. The others and I didn't mean to make her cry.

We started to respect her and ask her to come and not force her."

### ***Care Through Attending***

The Participants experienced making efforts to **care through attending**, their emotional experience was offered to the horse through their affection and empathy in attempts to discern Rojo's needs. This theme is demonstrated in the following statement:

"Here we're each getting our own individual ways of treating her. I would go up and stroke her and give her a little hug, maybe a kiss on the head. (He) would tend to feed her more. (He) liked to brush her and scratch under her ears. So we each had our own way of showing her affection and how we wanted to be with the horse."

This quote also evidenced the continuous emergent theme of **identity** as seen in this statement of individuation of efforts for care of Rojo. Individuation in care efforts, as an aspect of identity, is further evident in the following statement:

"We each have different personalities yet we all want the same fate for the horse when it's in our presence. We all want to be secure and safe, yet we want to give her that security in our own way."

This theme of identity through individuation was not only evident in their styles of care, but also in differentiation of emotional experience as stated in the following reflection of this individuation in caring and attending to Rojo.

"To respect others and their personal space and love them but hate them for one thing, but still love them for another... everybody has different feelings than something else or some other thing."



### ***Empathic Understanding***

Efforts of **empathic understanding** made in attempts toward building a relationship are evident as this participant described his awareness and the meaning made from the experience.

“Well, being with Rojo, it’s like having a child in your possession. She has to tell you what she wants. It’s like, you can’t overpower her so you must give her what she wants. You must be understanding. You must ask what she wants you to do. ... Well, I feel Rojo is more like a child because she is very playful. She’s old but you still, you have to take care of her. If you don’t set out water or hay, she will have nowhere to go if you don’t take care of her, she’ll die, she’ll get sick...if you don’t feed her.”

One participant made meaning in reflection of the aspects in the relational field that were experienced in their efforts with Rojo.

“We had to care for her and help her the way you have to care for others and yourself. And you have to help others and yourself. Otherwise life won’t work. By petting her and brushing her and not being mean at all.”

### ***Contact Boundary***

The following quotation described what a participant experienced as they negotiated interaction at the **contact boundary** between self and other.

“I felt like she respected me and like I respected her space and she accepted that I wanted to give her a hug and listen to her heart so she let

me and didn't react so quickly. It was one chance of a lifetime. Some horses wouldn't let you do that, some horses would, but she was the sort of person who wouldn't and would and she felt like I respected her enough that she would let me get in her personal space and not hurt her personal space."

This next statement made by a participant is an example of their process developing awareness and making meaning through experience with the horse at the perceived **contact boundary**. He reflected on the evocative feelings brought up in his own interactions and the perceptions of those with other participants.

"I have lot's of respect for living things. That I love many things and some things I sort of hate but I still love them in a way. That I loved her in the way that she is but sort of despised what she did with (them) and thought she could do...like she could respect them and I still loved her although she didn't let them touch her in a loving respecting way, even though it was sort of her personal space, I can understand that but even though she feels like that she should still take chances. To respect others and their personal space and love them but hate them for one thing, but still love them for another. That everybody has different feelings than something else or some other thing."

The above quote further evidenced the theme of experiencing **emotion and empathy** as evidenced by the strong statements of love and respect, hate and despise in this participant's consideration of other participants' experiences with the horse.

The following quote is from the adult participant's observation of the participants' transformative process. He cited the thematic components of **caring**, **emotion** and **empathy** as they engaged Rojo and experienced the relational field.

“Well it definitely stood out for me because it was one of those times where I saw that...I experienced them as having genuine concern for other. Which you know, at their age, often times the only time I see them display concern or display concern or care for the feelings of someone other than themselves is when there's crisis or tragedy... Whereas it was interesting that they observed Rojo's emotional response and that they took it upon themselves to offer care. And it completely changed what they were willing to do with Rojo when they took into account how they thought she was feeling. Each one of them... (he) put the blanket on her, (he) gave her some food and let her rest. He was projecting his own 'well if I were her this is what I would want', whether it was Rojo's experience or not.”

This theme of **relational field** and its components can be summarized with the following statement in which a participant, in recognition of the relational experience, offered an expression of gratitude.

“We put a blanket on her. She seemed cold. We brushed her, cleaned her, thanked her and gave her new food. Most of all, trying to show our appreciation for her. Saying 'thanks, thanks for helping us get through this. Thanks for cooperating.' And I think she took it quite well.”

This appreciation is an aspect of meaning making by the participant as he recognized he had experienced something of value for which he was grateful.

This experience with the horse was reflective of the I-Thou relationship experienced between participants and Rojo. Their shifting recognition of the horse from it to thou was reflected in their caring and relational behavior, further indication of a transformative process. Martin Buber (1969), in his autobiographical sketches, recollects his first conscious I-Thou experience which also occurred with a horse.

When I was eleven years of age, spending the summer at my grandparents estate, I used, as often as I could do it unobserved, to steal into the stable and gently stroke the neck of my darling, a broad dapple-grey horse. It was not a casual delight but a great, certainly friendly, but also deeply stirring happening. If I am to explain it now, beginning from the still very fresh memory of my hand, I must say what I experienced in touch with the animal was the Other, the immense otherness of the Other, which, however, did not remain strange like the otherness of the ox and the ram, but rather let me draw near and touch it. When I stroked the mighty mane, sometimes marvelously smooth-combed, at other times just as astonishingly wild, and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of the *Thou* and *Thou* with me. The horse, even when I had not begun by pouring oats for him into the manger, very

gently raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator gives a signal meant to be recognizable only to his fellow-conspirator; and I was approved. (p. 31-32)

In conclusion, the program component of the horse facilitated activities, demonstrated the Gestalt Cycle of Experience (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951). The Sensation phase was represented by approach as participants were feeling her out and tracked their own sense of self in safety and self-containment. The Awareness phase was represented as they began to interact and develop comfort with Rojo, leaned into their resistance and made efforts toward affection to know they are safe and have mutual comfort. The Mobilization of Energy happened as they tested the boundaries, planned and initiated the activity. They immersed themselves in the Action phase as they made efforts to move Rojo, especially in pulling her hard. The Contact phase was evident as they shifted their interaction style and recognized a different way of being that was more effective in accomplishing their goals. Assimilation and Integration happened as Rojo began to more fully engage them in accomplishing their intended goals and they made meaning of their experience by recognizing their relational efforts were more effective than force. Closure was initiated by participants as they comforted Rojo, offered further care as an expression of gratitude, cleaned up the activity space, and began transitioning to their next activity.

### *Hay Bale Fort*

From the paddock, the participants next went to explore the barn. They first noted and gave attention to the barn's construction, which dated back to the mid-1800s. The

support beams were hand cut, and ran across the length of the barn. The cross beams that held up the roof were round and uncut, with the bark still attached. The barn cats ran across the floor and excited the boys, as they yelled “these cats are awesome.” They were soon climbing on and jumping off the stacked hay bales.

### ***Spontaneous Organic Process***

This portion of the program involved a facilitation choice of allowing change in the agenda to follow the participant’s interest to build a hay bale fort. This was an adaption of a portion of the afternoon agenda, but supported the participants in their ambitious and self-directed undertaking. It turned out to be very meaningful, provided for rich discussion in data collection, and was very figural in the overall experience for the participants. This change is further expanded upon by citing it as the introduction to the theme of **spontaneous organic process**. One participant’s discussion of their process of experience, illustrates an awareness of the spontaneous organic process.

“I don’t know, it was really cool and we had a lot of fun doing it.

The thought that we didn’t even plan it, we just started it and we didn’t even know how it was going to turn out was pretty amazing.”

Another participant’s quotation described the meaning made from his participation in the spontaneous organic process of building the hay bale fort.

“That you should plan for things but you should be open to having them be changed into something else that may be more fun than what you had planned.”

These quotations describe the spontaneous organic aspects in the building of a hay bale fort and narrate the transformative process of experience that facilitated awareness which

catalyzed meaning and greater application to life experience. The process of building the hay bale fort, involved planning, design, and the moving of the heavy hay bales. Their sharing of ideas of how to best execute their plans required a great deal of focus and cooperation. The participants' descriptions of this process were evident of the emergent continuous theme of **challenge and collaborative problem solving**, in this context it may be more accurately described as **team building**. This is presented in the following participant quotations.

*Challenge, Collaborative Problem Solving, Team Building*

“We each helped each other move the hay stacks that were the heavier ones. It was easy to work together because there were only 3 of us.”

“It was hard, struggling, but fun, with team work... It would be harder if it was just one person doing the job but with two other people as a team, we can count on each other to help each other.”

A quote from the adult participant further elaborated the team building and collaborative process in meeting the challenge of building a hay bale fort.

“They had this shared vision of ‘this will be a fort, we won’t know exactly what it’s going to look like but we know we want a fort.’ And the ‘how do we best work together’ wasn’t the primary thing. So as they each had their own individual thing that they were doing and had to work in concert because they all shared the objective of having a fort.”

The adult participant further observed a supportive aspect that allowed for the collaboration and team work as opposed to an experience of competition.

“There were enough hay bales for everybody. It’s not like there was a limited amount of hay bales. There was no competition for ‘I need hay bales, I need yours. I need your hay bale’... There was enough hay bales that everyone had enough. There was no shortage.”

This became a period of intense activity and enthusiasm for the participants, lasting over an hour in which they worked together to construct a sizeable fort with a secret passage. One thematic awareness that participants described in reflection of their experience of building the hay bale fort was of **combining mental and physical process**. The awareness of the use of mental and physical processes in combination to achieve the task of building the hay bale fort is described in the following quote:

“It takes a lot of concentration to foresee, ‘this block will go here and that block will go there.’ We have to lift it doing this and it will take this many people to do it. It does take a lot of concentration and it is pretty hard work to move all those hay bales and then picture where they’re going to go. I didn’t think we were going to pull off the tunnel. It took an hour of our extra time besides just the pit and it was pretty cool, yeah.”

This theme is further echoed in a participant’s description as he viewed the photos from that experience and described what he saw.

“That’s (him) carrying a huge hay bale. Those hay bales were pretty heavy; I think we probably moved at least 25 or more. It feels awesome to have done so much work...I was thinking if we should move another hay bale from the bottom so that we could have more room. We



had to do a lot of thinking. It was sort of like Tetris because we had to put them in perfectly.”

One participant spoke to the group’s self-awareness and transformation in the use of mind and body together in the building process.

“Stronger, in the mind and in the body form. In the body form, it was sort of like you were moving heavy things and it was sort of a struggling point but we could all do it with the body form. And in the mental form figuring out where each piece was going.”

Physical Process theory is significant in the Gestalt Therapy theory of transformative process. Through embodied experience, a deepening of awareness occurs that relates to integration of body into self (Kepner, 1987). Meaning is made by participants as they reflect on their experience of strength and physical activity in their efforts of building the hay bale fort.

### ***Industriousness and Sense of Accomplishment***

The participants’ awareness of their intense activity spoke to a thematic expression of their feelings of **industriousness and sense of accomplishment**. This is evident in the statements in the above paragraph and in the following description of their intense effort:

“I’m putting up a hay stack, falling, struggling. We moved fifty to one hundred hay stacks. So that’s around 5000 pounds.”

This theme is further represented in the following quote of a participant’s description of their process:

“We put in a lot of work, a good hour, hour and a half, as I said before. And we put a lot of thought into what we were trying to do. Then at the end it got dark, we brought a lantern in there. We’re like ‘Wow! We made this, it was us. Our sweat, our blood and everything that we put into this. And it was worth it’. We just sat down and we didn’t even have to use it. Most of the time we didn’t even use it. We were just, doing something else. But it was just the feeling like the happiness of feeling like ‘wow it’s going to be so cool when it’s done.’ It’s better building it than when it is done.”

During the interviews, the participants’ excitement became elevated as they described their experience and their awareness of their **industriousness and sense of accomplishment**, as is clear in the following quote:

“There is the best part! We built this huge hay fort with hay bales, it was really fun. It was about 10 feet deep, 5 by 8 feet, stairs, a tunnel and a roof in the tunnel. We had a storage compartment, and it was fun! We decided to do it! That’s a picture of the first part of it, when we were just starting the foundation for it. That’s (him) carrying a huge hay bale. Those hay bales were pretty heavy; I think we probably moved at least 25 or more. It feels awesome to have done so much work.”

This statement is also a reflection of the excitement participants had in the building process they experienced.

“Fun, Fun, Fun, Fun! We went into the barn and put the hay stacks together and made a fort.”

They each described this photo of a participant standing triumphantly atop the fort with his arms raised, which is a stance each of them did at some point in the building process:

“I was really high up and thought it was funny. I was kind of saying ‘we conquered it!’ It was powerful because I was so high up. I felt like I was the leader. Because I thought I was cool, I guess. I felt happy because I did something good and accomplished something.”

”He felt strong moving hay stacks.”

”I felt in charge, being constructive. It feels powerful.”

”He’s saying that ‘we did it, you know, we’re proud, we’re strong, we’re cool’ like we accomplished our goal.”

This theme of **industriousness and sense of accomplishment** is aligned with psychosocial developmental theory (Erikson 1963). Participants, in recognition of their accomplishment, expressed a positive sense of self in their statements of performance. Their industriousness, in designing and meeting a challenge, provided the opportunity for their expressions of competence and mastery in self and ability.

The themes of transformative process were evident throughout this case study. Participants made clear statements of their process during the experience, which led to awareness and meaning, as is evident in the following quotations:

“Like you choose cooperation, organization...it definitely has to do with math and geometry. Using the cubic square inch to see that ‘this is too big to fit in this spot but this is small enough.’ It just helps you with almost everything that you can do. Organization. Bravery to see if you will

do it, if you have a doubt, try it anyway. Just, it was a great experience that we can use...I look at things much more closely now, I think, because everything had to be exact with this. You couldn't put one leaning half way off the side of the wall or else the whole thing would collapse. You had to place the block right so it taught me to look much more carefully and taught me to be much more understanding for other peoples' ideas, not just my own."

The meaning participants made of their experience and awarenesses were further related to the accomplishments of their lived experience.

"Creativity and thought process, using your mind to accomplish something greater. Like completing a project in school. When you've worked really hard and it's done and you get a really good grade on it."

This meaning was further related to a metaphor about choices and happiness in lived experience.

"The hay fort, it was building up the good, heavenly sort of things... Like the building was the good choices... It's sort of building bits and pieces of your life so you can be happier."

The completed walls of the fort were taller than any of them. The top was open and the length and width was about 6 by 8 feet. Most of the effort was their own, besides their occasional request for assistance from the facilitators to place the higher hay bales. After their construction efforts, they got some snacks and a light from base camp and had some down time in their new fort.

This activity can be related to the Gestalt Therapy theory aspect of Figure/Ground (Nevis, 1987; Yontef, 1993). Figure/Ground is evident in the participants' experiential process of having entered the barn and noticed the hay bales - the ground. The fort became the emerging figure. They entered the barn and then found the ground upon which they began engagement in a spontaneous organic process. The figure emerged and became clear through their industriousness and collaborative process. The figure became full as they experienced the sense of accomplishment and as they sat in the fort and enjoyed their creation.

The time they then spent in the fort and then some time after in the farm house for a snack, gave the participants some additional down time. These down time periods were included in the design of the program as it was a long day and I wanted to keep a reasonable expectation for participants' capacity for attention and focus. After another recharge, the group geared back up and adventured out for another hike.

### *Hike to the River*

This next program component began with a hike from the main area down a path that led to the Chagrin River. Along the way, participants had some wrestling and a short-lived snowball fight. Their attention along the hike became focused on a very old stone wall that they were then able to follow along the length to the river. Their attention was drawn to the wall's texture, its parts, and some larger boulders that were part of the wall. This hiking was intentionally not hurried. The purpose was of being in nature, allowing for both exploration and immersion.

On arriving, the participants engaged in a meditative gazing at the river and at the related scenery. Following this, the participants discovered large ice sheets above the banks of the river and began an extensive period of breaking up the ice and launching the parts into the river. During the interviews this destructive process was what they spoke to in their descriptions of the experience. These ice sheets were 3-4 inches thick. The destruction began with some hitting of the ice for sounds and rhythms, but from the time the first ice sheet broke, the three participants became intensely focused on asserting their destructive force upon the ice. As they cast the ice into the river, the boys paused in their activity and cheered the one throwing the ice. Each ice sheet was named as though it was a ship being cast into the river in a brief ceremonial manner. One participant provided the following description of this experience:

“Yeah we started, we saw the old bridge and we started tossing ice into the water and naming them and trying to sink them like they were ships.”

Another participant described it with more feeling:

“Oh yeah! We broke huge pieces of ice and threw them in and floated them down the river. It was really fun! ... It was really tough. We used our feet. Some of them broke the first time we tried. Some took 25 steps to finally break it. Just kicks, I guess....Yep, we broke it, we pushed it into the river.”

Some of the ice sheets required the participants to work together because of their large size and weight. In this, they at times came together to support each other with the

larger pieces. This was thematic of the emergent continuous theme of **collaborative problem solving** and **teamwork**.

### *Collaborative Problem Solving and Teamwork*

One participant described his awareness and appreciation of the support that was given and received as the participants worked together to accomplish their intended efforts:

“And it also helped us again with combining our strengths. As in, you can’t lift a four inch thick 2 by 5 foot piece of ice that’s glued down to the floor by yourself. You need help. So all of us working together as you can see in some of these pictures is really quite cool.”

### *Emotional Release*

The following quotes are indicative of a thematic **emotional release** occurring for participants in their experience as they broke up and cast away the ice. One participant described his experience of the physical process, his awareness of it being evocative of his past experience and feelings, and the meaning made of his sense of release.

“Chipping away the ice was sort of like getting rid of the bad things that stop me from doing the good things. ...The chipping away was the bad choices that I have done in my time. ...Moving those big pieces of ice was like getting rid of the things in your mind that trouble you. Sort of like devilish things. It was hard to finally get to move them. And I almost fell in which is sort of like falling in the trap of evil.”

In a less definitive and somewhat lighter statement another participant expressed awareness of their sense of his **emotional release** in the breaking up and casting off the ice.

“It was definitely fun! But I was getting... you were just exerting so much energy and laughing and have such a good time and we just had a bunch of feelings running through you, about wow this is great...it’s just really hard to explain.”

Gestalt Therapy Theory supports the participants’ experiences by recognizing emotion as having a significant role in human functioning, psychotherapeutic change, and transformative process. Experience of emotion, emotional awareness, and emotional regulation are integral in the Gestalt model of transformative process (Greenberg, 2003). Gestalt therapy theory explores emotions in connection with the body, emotions as filters that regulate contact, and emotions as thematic patterns formed by life experiences (Bender-Junker, 2003).

### ***Aggression***

The participants were in a flurry of activity; kicking, prying with sticks, throwing the ice pieces and jumping from spot to spot. The continuous emergent theme of **aggression** was strongly evident in their action throughout this activity. A participant made meaning of his experiencing aggression in his actions in the activity. He expressed his self-awareness of his own aggressiveness, and made meaning by relating this to how this is played out in his life experiences.

“It was pretty cool. I liked it especially. I play the drums because I get to hit stuff. I sit in school and I hit the table with my hand and getting



to kick and hit stuff into the river. ...Like having to break the ice and put it into the river was pretty enjoyable for me. ...I think it goes along completely of how I live my life. ...Taking apart and throwing it away, breaking the ice and throwing it away. ...I tend to be a very aggressive person. I would call that aggressive behavior. I feel I go after life when I want something, I try and get it. I don't let anything get in my way. And I feel that's how my life is driven."

This participant expressed awareness and meaning of aggression as he further recognized that aggression has implications and context in life experience.

"How to be aggressive without having a bad behavior or having a bad reputation. The reputation of aggression that we all take into consideration, like something bad, but not being something bad, being something good. Expressing yourself. Expressing your anger. Expressing your feelings. Not just what everyone normally would think about aggression."

Gestalt Therapy Theory recognizes healthy aggression as both a function of assimilation and formation of holistic self in relation to ever changing experiences and environments (Perls, 1947). Aggression, as part of healthy transformative processes, serves to develop ground in the process of contact for deepening relationship with self, other, and environment (Lobb, 2007). Aggressive expression is viewed as a drive toward fulfillment in experience and assimilation of transformative process. Aggression in relation to the emerging figures that are being assimilated is in relation to the support of deepening organismic wholeness, unity, and balance in the transformative process

(Brothers, 1986). The participants' actions of aggression functioned in support of a transformative process in their assimilation of the experience, awareness, and meaning that became figural throughout the program. Their spontaneous organic experience of aggressive action during the last activity in the day's program was aligned with the transformative process, as viewed by Gestalt therapy theory, in that it served to support assimilation of all that emerged and occurred throughout the day.

This experience reflects in metaphor the Gestalt Therapy theory aspect of developing awareness at the contact boundary (Crocker, 1988) and perhaps the psychotherapeutic process in general. The participants at the river's edge worked intensively to break away the frozen layers of ice. In this process they exposed the ground and cast the ice into the river. The river was representational of the processing of experience and emotion as this layer was broken away and cast into the strong current. During this time, the participants were being reminded of being mindful of the rivers edge, avoiding a full emersion, as if a grading of experience was being facilitated.

After this, the walk back to the main area of the farm was slow and strained. The participants were exhausted from their efforts. One participant related to his feeling of exhaustion as he looked at the photos taken while walking back from the river. He described his feelings as he tried to walk with his father. (I also recall him making a pleading request to be carried.)

“Exhausted but still with him. My body is exhausted but my mind is with him. Loving and respecting. Exhausted and tired, can't really move my muscles anymore. I dragged my feet. I dragged my lead feet and when we got back I felt like I succeeded in a mission.”

After arriving back at the farm house, the participants were given a much needed rest. The group sat together and shared an end of the day meal and watched the darkened sky turn to night. The final activity of the program was conducted there in the farm house and luckily required little physical effort by the participants. It was designed to further the rites of passage, support the data collection and to give closure to the program.

### *Medicine Pouches and Closing*

This final experience of the program day was designed to facilitate a sharing of knowledge and sacred tools. It also supported the participants' reflexive process of their experience of the entire program. The participants were each presented with a medicine pouch with semi-precious stones inside. Initially the participants' behaviors were somewhat silly and rather unfocused, which was not surprising because they were so tired. Materials such as sweet grass and objects from the facilitator's own medicine pouch were presented and ritually placed into the circle. Fortunately, this act settled the boys and drew their attention. This closing experience offered another example of the continuous emergent theme of **energetic range and container**.

### *Energetic Range and Container*

Again, the participants moved from a less structured, diffuse manner to a focused and directed attention and containment of behavior. They were given an opportunity to explore the materials. Then they participated in placing the objects to form a sacred circle. They were next read the story of Two Wolves (Stevenson, 2005). This story supported their awareness of personal strengths and the choices they make in life.

## Two Wolves

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life.

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil- filled with anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.”

“The other is good- filled with joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”

“The same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked, “Which wolf will win?”

His grandfather answered, “The one you feed.”

Herb Stevenson, (2005)

### *Curiosity and Joining*

The participants next engaged in a dialogue regarding the material in their medicine pouches that would evoke strength and supportive qualities when challenged by difficulty, as was reflected in the story. This experience and their engagement in the process evidenced themes of **curiosity** and **joining**. As participants explored the sacred objects they expressed their **curiosity** through questions and inquiry. They were introduced through the use of a medicine pouch, to the concept of the use of sacred objects and reflection of significant past experience, imagery, and archetypes to evoke a

present sense of strength, power, and presence. This facilitated a **joining**, as part of the rites of passage experience.

The participants experienced a belonging with others who shared knowledge in the use of sacred power and invocation. This dialogue was expanded upon, directing the participants to reflect on acquiring objects for their medicine pouches that represented aspects of their experience in the program. Then they considered how through these objects, they made meaning of their experiences by forming representational metaphors of the strengths and supportive qualities they may draw upon in their future, from having had the day's experiences.

This dialogue of the medicine pouch, in relation to the program experiences, was again echoed in the photo elicited interviews. The following narration of dialogue between participants and facilitator combines both experiences of reflection in receiving the medicine pouch and in its echo in the photo elicited interview. This narrative dialogue describes further the participants' perceptions of the emergent themes and their transformative processes, facilitating awareness from which a process of meaning making occurs. These statements about items the participants would add to their medicine pouches are symbolic of what they learned or held dear from their wilderness experience.

The following narrative is organized in order of program activity component. The facilitator's inquiry directed participants in their reflections through the statements. In response, the participants made statements about receiving the medicine pouches and echoed reflections during the dialogue in the photo elicited interview. In this narrative, the emergent themes are highlighted in bold.

“In receiving our medicine pouches we talked about how the pieces of the medicine pouch can be in a way like **memories**, each of those parts as you add to your medicine pouch things that represent experience and that we can take out and in a way that they help us to think of something as a **power** or a tool, a **strength** that we have that will help us to get through our experience. So what we talked about was in each of these experiences we had in the day, what we might take from that and put a physical part, that we might put in our medicine pouch and what it might represent. And it didn’t have to be something that would actually fit in the medicine pouch, just more a symbol of each of those experiences. We were going to start with the drumming. What might you put in your medicine pouch that represents the drumming?”

“If I had a drum in there, I would again feel **creativity** and **teamwork**. You feel like you have a team and its’ good.”

“I’d put a crystal bowl in the pouch. The sound of it is sort of like **one beat that never ends**. Like your **soul that will never die**. **Immortal**.”

“The drum skin. A piece of the wood, the shaving of the carving of the head... I think it would represent the drum itself. Just that one piece...it would represent **all the times I used the drum**, all the times that I’ve enjoyed or have memories with that drum would come back...the **enjoyment, the passion of drumming**. I think that would come back, yeah.”

“The head of a drum symbolized **enjoyment, excitement**. It would remind me of experiences of drumming. I like **rhythm and movement**. I feel bored when I am standing still.”

And the facilitator inquired, “What might you put in your medicine pouch which represents the hike and snowball fight?”

“If I put snow in there, I would feel **fun**.”

“A snowball symbolizes **excitement** and a **good time**.”

“For the snowball fight, I’d probably take this crystal. It would represent the **hurtfulness of being hit**. The feeling of the snowball, like how it’s cold at first, and you don’t touch it, and then you feel it more often and it starts to get warmer because it’s melting. **Penetrating the force field. Warmth** gives me **comfort**.”

“Brings back the **good times**, the **courage**, the use of the things we had in our possession and the **compromising**. All the things that happened would be brought back that I can use in every day life.”

And the facilitator inquired, “What might you put in your medicine pouches that represents the experience with the horse?”

“Rojo’s hair, so I could remember her. It’s good to think of memories, as long as they’re good. Bad memories, you just try not to think about. I just think of **caring**.”

“A leaf for **respect** and smoothness. Actually I’d probably bring a cup of water. Like if I could just somehow put water into a pouch. It’s very calm, smooth, clear, sort of a **respect** of how it is.”

I would put in Rojo's hair. She was **nice, loving, and real**. I want to **bring softness not roughness to my life**."

"Hair from Rojo symbolizes **responsibility**."

"Maybe some of Rojo's hair. ...The time that Rojo was with us and how **we helped her and she helped us**. ...I think she helped me because she taught me how to **care a little more**, like how to take **care of someone**, how to **be gentle**, how to **be calm**, how to **be cautious**, how to make someone **feel secure**. And I think I helped her by feeding her, by **taking care of her**, getting her a **sense of security**."

And the facilitator inquired, "What might you put in your medicine pouches that represents building the hay bale fort?"

"I would put hay in there and have a feeling of **creativity**."

"A hay stack or a piece of straw. It represents **smooth building, hard working, muscle building**."

"A piece of hay...The **concentration** that it took. The thought of where to put all the blocks. The **quietness**, the feeling of all the hay coming down, the **feeling of the joy of awe, completing the task**."

And the facilitator inquired, "What might you put in your medicine pouches that represents the hike to the river and breaking of the ice?"

"Just a **feeling of power**."

"Ice symbolized **fun and adventure**."

"Ice. **Taking out the trash sort of like in your mind**. You're taking out the trash, like bad things that would make you do something



bad. Even though they can't really make you, it's your **choice**, but something that would take over your mind."

"A piece of ice. It would tell of **aggression. Strength. Power.** The breaking apart of the things and the **help of others** combined to lift that piece of ice."

The presentation of the medicine pouch, with the dialogue reflecting on the program activity components, was intentionally presented here as only quotes and excluded other narrative descriptions and analyses of themes. As aligned with the participatory research methodology, this was done in this section in order to give participants an uninterrupted voice in describing their awarenesses and meanings made from their experiences. These statements represent a taking of the evident strengths into further lived experiences. These statements serve as conclusions for the group program portion of this chapter, giving the participants the final word.

### *Individual Program*

The individual wilderness-centered rites of passage experience was intended to deepen the rites of passage aspects of the experience by furthering participants' emersion in nature and introducing them to metaphysical and anthropomorphic qualities of elemental nature. This experience took place at a community wilderness park. The participants were prepared for the experience through discussion with the facilitator in which they focused on learning of a series of experiences in nature, each of which could offer a recreation of support and connection in their lives. They also discussed their role and participation in the data collection and the change in

research methods for this experience. This individual experience included hiking throughout the park to locations where participants experienced focusing on elemental nature. This individual experience of the wilderness-centered rites of passage had several experiential activity components.

Participants experienced the river element, rock element with solo experience in a cave, and tree element in this experience. The narrative analyses of the individual portion of the wilderness-centered rites of passage experience will be presented in the multiple case narrative format.

Participants began the experience crossing a natural threshold as they walked to a cliff edge and down a large set of stone steps to their first activity. Prior to their descent into the natural world, a ritual offering of tobacco was given to create sacred space and mark the crossing of a threshold into less familiar ground as related to the rites of passage. Tobacco was held to the heart as intentions were set and then sprinkled on the ground. One participant made meaning of the experience by recognizing, thematically, the continuous emergent theme of **spirituality and reverence for nature**.

“I think that staying at the steps and throwing the tobacco on the ground and into the water was a sign that tobacco is sort of like holy water, so it blesses the trees and the water. It’s more of a part of God. ...So more people appreciate what is there and animals feel more comfortable being there when other people are there that respect there home.”

### *The River*

They sat at the river's edge on a precipice overhang with their feet dangling over, just above a rushing water fall. There, the participants sat in contemplation and introspection. Participants described their direct experience of sitting at the river, sensing and observing, thematically describing the experience as **peaceful and calming**, which is revisited as a continuous emergent theme in other parts of the individual experience.

“It was fun. The water was rough....Peaceful, it runs in one direction. I feel calm. There is no trouble in it.”

The themes are furthered explored in the following statement, which also introduces the continuous emergent theme of **non-ordinary reality**.

“It felt peaceful and the water moving felt really good around me. I felt like I could talk to it, not really, but through your mind, telepathically....Peaceful. It felt calming.”

Participants individually processed the river experience through drumming, meditative practice, projective expression, and dialogue with facilitator. They were instructed by the facilitator to evoke and commune with the spirit of the river. They discussed with the facilitator their sense of themselves in the practice and their felt sense of the river spirit. This experience furthered the continuous emergent theme of **non-ordinary reality** evident in this experience as a participant described his experience of gazing at the river.

“I say the magic of water is the faces that appear when the water hits the rock with force. The bubbles of the water and the water stream sort of make a face and that is sort of a water person.”

The meditative practice was described by a participant with projective expression as he drew upon his **spiritual experience** to make meaning of the non-ordinary aspects of his experience of raising and communing with the spirit of the water.

“I sort of just stare at things and to me they sort of just come to life. If you look at the grass you know it is already alive. If you just stare at the grass for me it becomes more alive and you can see what happens to it...I stare at the water for the same reason I stare at the grass. Even though the water is sort of dead even though it is moving because of the way earth is shaped, yet when I stare at it, it is like water is forming together forming arms legs and head and walking away but only going one way.”

This participant furthers his narrative description of experiencing **non-ordinary reality** as he makes a statement of awareness and perception of meaning related to the continuous emergent theme of **spirituality and reverence for Nature**.

“You sort of raise the water spirits and the water gods from the river and have them rise up into the sky and bring them back down to put them back in their home. They are sort of the same thing in a different logic area. They are the same in that as I stare at them they become spirit and god and to you they are already spirit and god and we are both raising them up and putting them back down.”

Part of the experience was a ritual casting seeds into the river to symbolize a setting of intentions forward, and a letting go or casting away of what is or what they would like to be behind them. They contemplated the qualities of the river as a metaphor

for their personal and relational experience. Through the participant statements the continuous emergent theme of **emotional release** was evident and represented in the following quotes. One participant described the meaning he made of his experience in this practice.

“Well the river is like movement. And what ever emotion you have, it’s like dropping a seed into it (the river), it will carry it until it plants it somewhere then it will grow. So if you have a bad emotion or a good emotion it will carry it until you find something better to take its place.”

Participants applied their experience to managing their emotions in their greater life experiences as they made statements in recognition of their ability to recreate the experience and revisit the river.

“If I have a heavy heart I can come here and relieve it. If I have a happy heart I can throw seeds in the river and be happier.”

One participant discussed immersing himself in the river for **emotional management and release**.

“Well it would be really fun. You could splash around. You could also help get some of those angry emotions out. If you’re happy you could just sit and listen to the frogs chirping.”

One participant further made meaning of his experience as he applied it to his life experience by relating the river experience to a therapeutic tool.

“Well if I am upset about something, instead of taking my anger out on somebody else, I could just drum and listen to the flow of the water

and let it take my angry emotions away instead of hurting somebody else by it. I could use this as kind of a therapist or a therapy session to help calm my emotions.”

One participant gave a summary of his experience and observations with the river as represented in his drumming. He described his drumming in relation to the river as a metaphor for his internal experience.

“What I felt when I was drumming.... I saw a leaf. It was up stream in the current of the river, it was going down. And every time it was nice quiet and soft, then every time it would hit a rough spot in the river the drumming would get louder and more violent, faster. Then it would come to the stillness again it would get quiet, then faster, then slower just the movement of the river, ever changing, never staying in one place. The sweeping of all your feelings away and finally, it gets caught and the seed is planted and the leaf is no longer in the river’s current.”

From the river’s edge, participants hiked a narrow and somewhat challenging trail along the river. The river trail led to another set of stone stairs that led to a trail that jutted out from the cliff side. Hiking this terrain furthered the physical metaphor of ascent to higher status as a rite of passage can mark. Additionally this was representative of the narrowness of the trail that then fell off the edge, a traversing of the less traveled and more challenging paths to self awareness. This path led participants to the cave where they experienced their solo time, alone with nature. A participant related his descriptive experience of hiking these trails and the awarenesses that emerged as he made meaning in

application to aspects of personal feeling and the contrast to his perception of the greater world.

“The path was a little rocky and sometimes it was smooth, it was a slope, it was a hill. ...It felt good. Like your body is uneven and the trail was uneven. It is sort of felt like you were on top of the world of unevenness. It doesn't feel like everything is perfect. Everything has a jagged line.”

Another participant recorded on their solo time their experience of hiking to the cave and thematically the **challenge and achievement** in having traversed the rough and icy terrain. He used the metaphor of the drum beat to share his experience. Within this descriptive narration are the themes of **Physicality, Present-centered Experience, Attention and Mindfulness.**

“Then I was just drumming what the experience was from our hike here. I was just going over in my mind all the experiences. Like how we were when we were walking, we were walking in a pattern, left right left right, then suddenly you slip on the ice, and then the drumming gets faster and louder, and then you finally catch your balance then the drumming goes back to the straight beats, your regular pattern of walking. Then you'll fall again, save yourself, back to the pattern of walking. When we were walking on the ice everything was just so quiet, you were completely present. Because walking on that ice it was so slippery you had to watch every movement, you had to think about where your next step was going to be, so that you wouldn't fall. It just took so much concentration. It's

like not normally when you are walking, left right you know, it's like breathing, you don't have to think about it. But on the ice it makes you completely aware of your surroundings to make you safe.”

### *Solo in the Cave*

The trail led to a ravine which participants hiked through to get to the cave in which they experienced their solo time. The cave was about 300 yards up the ravine from the river and half way up the side of the steep ravine. They had to climb a very narrow ascending path to get to the cave. This again was representative of the ascent to higher self and greater knowing of the rites of passage experience. The cave was shallow and wide, with the rock floor that extended out beyond the overhang of the roof, after which the ledge dropped off to the bottom of the ravine. The participants experienced another cliff, a metaphor in the rites of passage to one's own experiential edge. Accompanied by the darkness of the cave, this was a place to risk and reach beyond the edge of one's own familiarity into the unknown, the unseen, and the undiscovered.

Participants were prepared for their solo time through provisional dialogue with the facilitator. This dialogue focused on experiencing the metaphysical anthropomorphic qualities of the rock and cave, raising and connecting with the rock and cave spirit, and through reflection exploring a sense of self and of personal power intrinsic in nature. The participants were supported to settle in the cave. They were instructed to speak into the recorder during this time, describing their experience and their thoughts and feelings that emerged, after which the facilitator walked down the ravine, away from the participant, leaving them alone in the cave. The participants were not given a time constraint for



staying in the cave, but instructed to return to the facilitator when they felt their time there was complete and they were ready. The solo times lasted between 20-30 minutes. The participants expressed the impact of the experience and had observable changes in their mood, affect and temperament upon returning.

For one participant there was a recording device malfunction. His experience on the solo in the cave was documented through recorded post-solo reflection. The other participants were able to record their experiences directly. The reflections were thematic of a sense of **peacefulness and calming** and **communion and harmony with nature**.

One participant further made projective expression which furthers the continuous emergent theme of **non-ordinary reality**. This was evident as the participant described personification and anthropomorphization of the natural element of rock in his narrative. He described his experience and awareness of setting in the cave and made meaning of his experience of harmony in nature.

“The cave and the rocks were cool and peaceful because there was not as much water noise and people noise. Yet if you make a rhythm everything in the woods goes with it, it never stops and not go with the flow. Everything goes with the flow so if you make a beat it all stays together.”

This participant in reflection of the **non-ordinary reality** experience further made meaning and application through his perceptions of a thematic **balance and interconnection in awareness of cyclical nature**.

“I would not say they are really stone people. I would say they are stone creatures. As like the water creature, the tree creature and all those other creatures. It is sort of because they could be an animal it could be a human, or a germ or an insect or a parasite or anything like that because it all helps you. ...The stone creatures are sort of like, if you destroy something or you build something the stone creatures do the same thing as a human being would or creature would. They would build and then destroy or destroy and then build. It is sort of an even mark of life. You want to destroy something, yet you also want to build something. When you build something it sort of gets in the way and then when you destroy something it also gets in the way yet it gets rid of what ever is in the way. ...The balance of life is sort of light and darkness. One moment it is light and one moment it is dark. It has an even amount. ...Building and destroying what needs to be built and destroyed to make it an even flow so everything runs peacefully.”

Another participant described his experience of the solo time in themes of **feeling isolation** and **having voice**. His statements further reflected his process from which awareness was evoked from, and he then made meaning related to having a thematic **sense of place in nature**. In preparation for the solo in the cave, he made the following statement of awareness and meaning.

“I think this is a way to be heard. To be heard by everything. If it moves it can hear you. The good thing about nature is everything is living, even the rocks have vibrations. So at any one moment, something is

listening to you. So this big rock under us right now is listening to what we are saying.”

This participant made the following reflections related to these themes as he sat alone in the cave.

“OK so this is my solo time, I am in the cave. I am here alone for a little while. It feels like I am the only one left in the world. Like I am the only one here, because I cannot hear anyone, see anyone, all I hear is the water. It is almost a good feeling. It feels like I could talk and be heard by everything. It feels like nothing else in the world, no other human or no other human made thing is making a noise. Just nature and me and this cave. And I feel good, I feel really good.”

He then described thematically his **sense of place among the time and grandeur of Nature.**

“I just want to add one more thing. I feel like I am at the top of the world because all of these huge immense rocks are surrounding me and I am just a small itty bitty eight grader among thousands, millions of year old, maybe billion year old rocks. I feel like I am a baby compared to a dinosaur. It is amazing, I like it a lot. I feel like I am the first one to adventure here and it is welcoming me. It is pretty cool.”

### *Tree*

Participants then hiked from the cave, up the ravine, to a wooded area of the park. There along the edge of a creek with high walls was a great tree. Her large roots reached

down the creek wall toward the water. The roots created a natural cradle-like resting place upon which participants were able to lay down and experience the tree. The facilitator demonstrated getting into the tree and being in the resting position. They had some preparative dialogue about the anthropomorphic and metaphysical properties of the tree. They were further instructed on noticing what they were experiencing in terms of their awareness of sensation. To allow for more than a cognitive experience, they were instructed to be aware of their felt experience. Participants already had some familiarity with meditative practice and were easily able to draw upon this in their experience with the tree.

Participants were able to immerse with profound depth into a relational interaction with the great tree and describe personified qualities of the tree in a deeply felt experience. In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber (1914,1958) describes potentials for relationship through the metaphor of a tree. The following quote describes these potentials. Afterward the narrative experience of participants with the tree exemplifies this relational potential set by Buber.

I contemplate a tree.

I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of blue silver ground.

I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air -and the growing itself in its darkness.

I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life.

I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it's only as an expression of the law –those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate.

I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and externalize it.

Through all of this the tree remains my object, and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an it. The power of exclusiveness has seized me. (p. 8-9)

Participants' description of the experience was strongly based in sensation. Participants shared a thematic sense of **soothing in stillness**, a **mother-like nurturing**, and of **protection and safety**. One participant described their experience of being in the tree.

“I lied down in it for a long time, well not a long, long time but a decent amount of time. I was lying in the cradle of the tree because the roots form a perfect place to lie down and be cradled by the tree.”

One participant expressed their sense of the **soothing in stillness** perceived in the experience.

“You know it was so cold outside then all of a sudden I felt so warm, like I was protected. You notice all the small things, like twigs snapping, leaves rustling, and the sound of the wind that you never would have noticed when you are just walking making noise. It’s just so quiet... Yes, everything just slowed down like time was standing still.”

Participants made meaning of their awarenesses of sensation, as they described the thematic material of a **mother-like nurturing**.

“It felt like when you are a baby, how your mom cradles you in her arms, it felt like the tree was doing that to me, like the tree was cradling me in its arms. It felt like that was my mom in nature. It was really nice. It felt like my mom with me.”

This sensation of **mother-like nurturing** is further elaborated in the following participant’s description of making meaning of their experience and further applied a sense of **protection and safety**, as related to the larger experience.

“It was good. It feels like the tree is holding you sort of as you are a baby your mother held you. The tree is holding you to it. You feel like a son or daughter to it. It is protecting you from falling or getting hurt. ...It is helping you being protected just like the rock formations protecting you and the other rocks and the water.”

Participants made meaning as they applied their experiences of the tree to their greater life experiences and their potential to make a practice of revisiting the tree, by expressing their thematic perception of **receiving support in nature**.

“If I ever feel I need it I will come back. If I am ever sad I can go. It can comfort me as it feels like it is my own mom.”

One participant further contemplated their experience of the tree as they comparatively related it to their meditation practice.

“It is really quiet and you feel really at peace with yourself. You don’t worry about anything you’re completely focused on what you are doing, your mind is just in one place, and you don’t worry about this or that. It was different. It was more fun (with the tree). It was different because you can hear the sound of the wind and a tree snapping. Instead of just complete silence you have the sounds of nature around you.”

This comparative contemplation is further elaborated upon with greater meaning by this participant in his accessing the sense of **soothing in stillness**.

“Well when you meditate like that in complete silence, sometimes we get overwhelmed with ourselves like over-stressed. We have too many things going on at once and we’re worried about stuff that doesn’t matter in that moment your brain gets clutter. That (experience with the tree) relieves all that and slows everything down and says, ‘all right this is what’s going on now just don’t worry about anything else.’”

Two of the participants found a long hanging vine in the forest across from tree. They were able to swing on the vine. Both started with sitting and swinging. They then began exploring and experimenting with the possibilities of swinging on the vine. This further reflected the continuous emergent theme of **spontaneous organic process**, in that the experience was unplanned and the facilitator allowed the participants’ naturally

occurring process and curiosity to unfold and shape the activity. They both described their experience on the vine as figural to the overall experience, making statements of enjoyment and enthusiasm.

One participant was descriptive of his experience and the recollection of his sense of engagement in the vine experience and offered the following description:

“There was this vine. It dropped down in the form of a U. The vine was fun and you could sit in it and swing. It was a natural swing. And it was really cool. That was probably one of the most cool things in this whole place.”

Another participant described his experience with the vine and offered thematic meaning in application to his life experience related to **taking the path of least resistance** or **going with the flow**.

“It was the best vine and it was this thick, maybe even thicker than that (making hand gesture). It was huge and two trees went like this and the vine went 75 feet up in the air. ... The vine was a symbol sort of like go with the flow back and forth if you must. Because as a swing it is sort of a movement like you want to go back into the past yet you still have to go forward to see what happens before you do that. It’s sort of if you go up wind or up the water it is harder and you get out of breath and you lose your mind but if you go with the flow. It is sort of you sleeping instead of you having a nightmare.”

From the area in the woods with the vine and the tree by the creek, participants hiked back through the dense forest, returning to where they began. During this portion of



the hike and at the individual experience conclusion, participants were asked to reflect on their overall experience of the day. They made statements of figural aspects of their experience. They elaborated upon their descriptions of experience, further formed awarenesses, and made deeper meaning and application of their experiences. In closure, at the end of the overall experience they each received a crystal for their medicine pouch to mark the experience and their accomplishment.

### Summary

This chapter has provided a lens into the transformative process of the adolescent participants in this wilderness centered rites of passage program. Through narrative analyses, the phenomenon of transformative process was explored. This exploration began by offering insight into the prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences that influenced participants' intentions and expectations of the program, as well as the outcomes of this research. As aligned with the Gestalt therapy theory of transformative process, the case narratives provided descriptive narrative of the participants' experiences, the awarenesses that developed and the meaning made from these awarenesses. These case narratives describe the occurrences of these awarenesses within the framework of the wilderness-centered rites of passage. This transformative process was further elaborated upon by offering insight into participants' self-awareness as they described their perceptions of their own transformation and meaning as applied to lived experiences.

This next chapter offers researcher reflections and interpretations on this research process and its outcomes. It further discusses applications of the wilderness-centered rites of passage model and considers insights and next steps in practice for this practitioner-

researcher in Gestalt therapy theory and in the Gestalt research model as related to this dissertation.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, INTERPRETATIONS, AND SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

This chapter, *Summary, Interpretations, and Substantive Issues* provides summary, review, further thoughts, and reflections in concluding this dissertation. Chapter 5 begins by further exploring the purpose and intentions of this dissertation, then reviews research methods, explores quality, trustworthiness, and limitations of the methodology and the research process as it has been implemented. This is followed by a summary of the case narratives. Each summary revisits the analysis of the themes and the interpretations of the findings, from the inquiry of the stated research questions, and the relationship of the analyses to theoretical foundations. The summaries are followed by clinical and practical meaning, interpretation, and applications. Finally, this chapter explores and further discusses concepts and research that could follow this dissertation.

#### Purpose and Intentions

The purpose of this dissertation was to make a contribution to models and healthy blueprints that support the developmental process in our youth. Immersion in nature

through wilderness experiences and activities is a rite of passage. To explore the phenomenon of developmental transformation, a Gestalt therapy theory lens of experience facilitated a deepening of awareness and meaning making. An example blueprint is presented through exploring developmental and transformative processes within a multi-disciplinary model, inclusive of rites of passage, wilderness therapy, and Gestalt therapy theory. Utilizing a multi-faceted phenomenological process, this blueprint can offer insight toward increased understanding and practice with youth. This dissertation can also contribute to the field of Gestalt research, both in theory and in practice, informing qualitative researchers of the utility of Gestalt therapy theory in research practice.

In naming this dissertation I struggled between Nature-centered or Wilderness-centered rites of passage. Wilderness therapy, in literature and practice, has largely focused on intensive, long duration experiences deeply immersed in a wilderness environment. The choice for using the term Wilderness was two fold in that the term represents and demonstrates a nature-based program, as well as the related transformative process. First, this choice is representative not only of the environment in which the experience occurs, but of the wilderness of one's internal experience. As internal wilderness, the term is also representative of one's own being as well as one's "wild-side" that can emerge in rites of passage interventions. This "wild-side" was exemplified as participants reached beyond their norms and limitations in the drumming, intensive snowball fight, building of the hay bale fort, and the breaking of the ice. The internal wilderness was experienced when the participants' engagement, relationship and leadership skills were challenged while interacting with a horse, as well as having to

address and respond to her tears as she was pulled hard in their efforts to move her. The internal wilderness was further demonstrated as participants discussed their experiences of emotional release at the rivers and in their solo experiences in the cave.

Second in choosing between the wilderness or nature terms, another purpose of this dissertation was to demonstrate a program, a way of supporting others, which is more available and accessible to larger and broader populations than other models of greater length and in remote wilderness. Through this dissertation, this researcher-facilitator demonstrated that transformative processes can occur through Nature, not only in the long duration, deep emersion experience models, but in a less lengthy visit to a community park or local nature center. The design of this dissertation involved a less lengthy model that makes accessing nature, the wilderness of self and its transformative process, a more inclusive process, feasible for both seekers and practitioners, and not requiring the extensive commitment of other models. It also provided opportunities to create ongoing programs that provide experiences of rites of passage through immersing in nature and wilderness. The program model in this dissertation could be a component of a greater program that offers continuous community-centered support. This dissertation demonstrated a model that makes the wilderness-centered rites of passage more accessible, requiring fewer resources, and providing a greater capacity for adaptability to participants' needs.

### Review of Methods and Methodology

A phenomenological and participatory research model was used in the program intervention, data collection, and analyses. Through transparency and inclusion in all

facets of practice, participant collaboration was integrated into the research process. Through a phenomenological and participatory framework this study explored, via program component case narratives, the lived experiences and transformative processes of participants in a Wilderness- Centered Rites of Passage experience. The transformative process model was further enhanced by Gestalt therapy theory as it offers ways to describe participants' experiences and facilitates awareness, awarenesses that then initiate a process of meaning making (Fodor, 1998). To support credibility, participatory data collection, multiple methods, and multiple data sources were all utilized. The data collection method generated photographic documentations that were utilized to guide interviews and participants' journal entries, which further supported the interview process, participant-observation, and group sessions throughout the program components. Data analyses utilized phenomenological constant comparative methods of grounded theory research to create thematic codes and descriptions reflective of aspects of the Gestalt therapy theory model for change.

#### Quality and Limitations of Qualitative Research in General and to this Specific Study

This descriptive study provides an example of only one way to reach conclusions which pertain to the research questions. It is bound to the limitations of qualitative research, in that the data is subjective and has been influenced by a multiplicity of individual, situational, and circumstantial factors. Therefore, it is not an expectation that neither this program, the data generated from its study, nor its outcomes could be duplicated in any exacting manner the next time the program is offered. Similarity in program design can be reproduced, but the process and outcomes were dependent on the individuals, the current conditions, and the ongoing and ever changing interactions of

person and environment. The purpose of this dissertation was not to offer a sense of predictability in these wilderness experiences, but to demonstrate its potential. The efforts in this research process attempted to adhere to a structure and guidelines based in qualitative phenomenological research theory that supported the achievement of quality, trustworthiness, and credibility.

The quality, trustworthiness, and creditability of this dissertation in its fullness can be addressed by revisiting the indispensable qualities in qualitative research presented by Marrow (2005). Those indispensable qualities are social validity, sufficiency of and immersion in the data, attention to subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation and presentation. Attention to these indispensable qualities further serves to give purpose and context to this work and to this study.

Social validity is relevant to this study in that the outdoor experiences contributed to the forming of healthy models for enhancing youth development. This study demonstrates further the value of stewardship for the wilderness and the natural environment. Validity is represented in valuing the environment and in valuing human development as key priorities in the social frontiers.

Sufficiency of and immersion in the data was accomplished by the production of a vast volume of data, including 58 pages of transcribed recorded interviews, as well as a significant body of notes from participant observations. The quantity and quality of the interviews and field notes provided rich data, thick with description. The participatory aspect of the research data collection process added additional depth. Further, the multiplicity of role as facilitator-researcher, as well as adherence to phenomenological

and grounded theory methods, allowed me to delve deeply into the data both in observation, reflection, and analysis.

Attention to subjectivity and reflexivity was central to the design of the wilderness program. The components of the program sought to make representation of what participants would call “my experience.” The interweaving of experience may not be generalizable, but did give voice to the collective of individuals, both participant and researcher, within shared experiences.

Evaluating the adequacy of the data, its interpretation and presentation is to ask: did the collection of data provide for material that was used effectively to make a clear representation of the wilderness-centered rites of passage program experience and participants’ transformative process? Adequacy has been met in the dual research goals of this dissertation. First, one goal of this dissertation, as research, was the interpretation and presentation of the transformative process of the participants, the awarenesses that were evoked, and meanings they made, providing themes that adequately represented the phenomenon of transformation through the wilderness-centered rites of passage program. The second research goal of this dissertation was thoroughness to detail in presenting a model of a healthy rite of passage that could inform practitioners of the utility of this work to support development and transformation in today’s youth. As one reflects on another reader evaluating the adequacy of the data, its interpretation, and presentation, the evaluation may be subjective, depending on the reader’s own prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences that influence the lens with which they are evaluating the work. If this dissertation informs and is generative for practice, increases understanding, and inspires experience in nature, I am satisfied.



## Revisiting the Research Questions

The following section mirrors the structure of chapter 4 in that it addresses the research questions in the same manner, following the program component case narrative format. This includes a revisiting of the analyses of themes and interpretations of the findings from the inquiry of research questions and the relation of the analyses to theoretical foundations and topics of this study. This review begins with findings related to prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences influencing the program and research outcomes, followed by a review of the program component case narrative, its themes and related transformative processes. This begins with the group program and concludes with the individual program. After each case narrative, clinical and practical meaning, interpretation, and applications are addressed.

### *Prior Beliefs, Contexts, and Experiences*

This section revisits research questions Q1 and Q7. These questions focus on what participants were bringing with them in terms of prior experience, awareness, and meaning. The inquiry identified subjective and external influences upon both the program and the research process, providing insight into the influence of participants' prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences upon intentions, expectations, and outcomes both in the research process and the wilderness-centered rites of passage program. The research methods utilized to gather data to explore research questions Q1 and Q7 were participants' written journal entries, the photo elicited interviews which occurred after the group program, and the concurrent audio journal entries that occurred during the individual program. This section continues to explore the analyses of themes in their

meaning, their interpretation through the research questions and their clinical applications to further practice. Research questions Q1 and Q7 are restated here:

Q1: What are the intentions and expectations of participants in the wilderness centered rites of passage experience? (*What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing these intentions and expectations?*)

Q7: What prior beliefs, contexts, experiences are influencing the outcomes of Research questions 2-6?

All the participants had significant positive prior experience in nature. This provided, as reported by the participants, a sense of familiarity and feeling of enthusiasm regarding the Nature-based programming. Contrarily, participants did express some resistance to participation which was easily overcome through describing and experiencing the Nature-based activities. Participants reported perceptions and beliefs in the qualities of nature, providing themselves with a sense of calming, stillness, peace, pleasurable isolation, freedom from distraction, and a present centered orientation. Participants further discussed the polarity of the excitement of Nature-based activities, such as prior white water rafting experiences and the snowball fight in the group component of this program. Further influencing the participants in this research program and process was a stated preference for outdoor, nature based experience. This influenced the participants as they were entering a preferred environment to do a preferred activity.

Participants expressed attitudes of reverence and belief in the responsibility of stewardship for the natural environment into which they were to immerse themselves during the program and later during the inquiry process. Lastly, as addressed by the adult male participant-observer/co-researcher in the group program, an unknown factor was if

the participants perceived their experience and behaved differently as a result of his presence.

*Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

The participants' prior beliefs, contexts and experiences, as reported in the interviews, resurface throughout the narrative of the wilderness rites of passage program and are further represented in the themes that emerged, influencing both program experience and research findings. In both research of and in practice of these programs, what participants bring with them influences experiences, awarenesses and meanings of both the current experience, further reflections, and the ongoing transformative process. This can be related to the Gestalt therapy theory concept of Figure/Ground (Nevis, 1987), in that as the emergent figure forms, it is from the ground of prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences. As a practitioner using these experiences in a clinical setting, the question that arises is: of what importance is it to gather or have participants share information related to their prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences related to the current program. There is value in working with the unknown, allowing participants to enter the experience as a blank slate, which allows for present potentials and avoids the limitations of preconceived notions and judgment. However, there is also value in having knowledge of prior beliefs, contexts, and experiences, as familiarity or lack thereof, can support a practitioner to gauge the level of pace and degree of immersion. This can further inform to the practitioner as to the client's growing edge and what may be influencing expectations.

For the participants in this program, and research, the experience began by determining a familiarity of both nature immersion and wilderness-based activity. This shaped the participants' attitudes about participation. Further, they held beliefs in the

therapeutic qualities of nature, as evidenced in description of prior experiences supporting focus and attention while reducing extraneous thought clutter and sensory stimulation. Participants viewed experiences in nature as providing stress relief, offering opportunity for introspection, and as a vehicle to express and experience feelings of joy and reverence. Lastly, the adult male participant's influence on perceptions and behavior was inevitable. In practice, this speaks to the relationship of participants, the role and presence of group members' influences on individual members and the group.

Lastly, the adult male participant's influence on perceptions and behavior was inevitable. In practice, this speaks to the relationship of participants, the role and presence of group members' influences on individual members and the group. The adult male participant represented a consistent authority and a corner stone of familiar relationship in participants lives. In contrast, an adult participant or facilitator with limited or no prior relationship to participants would have had a different influence upon the intentions, expectations, and outcomes both in the research process and the wilderness-centered rites of passage program. The adult male participant's presence was a subjective factor that had influence upon the experiential and reflexive processes for each individual and the group as a whole. This influence formed research outcomes, in its shaping of how experience, awarenesses, and meaning occurred. His presence further provided support, support in group facilitation toward structure and containment, intervening to focus participants and provided behavioral intervention when it was needed. He supported participants to lean into what challenged them and to further attend to the present process that encouraged them to maintain attention to task. Since this research was not experimental, did not contain a control group, was not a comparative study, the presence

of an adult participant meant assessing his influence as more of ‘what was,’ another element of the overall environment.

From the perspective of a practitioner, the group formation and interrelationships of the group members should shape the facilitation choices and be held in awareness as the group process unfolds. There can be meaningful differences in programs depending on the group configuration - unrelated individuals, families, peers, social groups, work teams, leadership trainees, to name a few.

In summarizing research questions Q1 and Q7, the participants in this iteration of the Wilderness program did bring beliefs about nature and wilderness activities through their prior experiences. The results of research questions Q2 through Q6 were inevitably influenced by prior experiences, discussion of the prior experiences and in their knowledge that prior experiences were considered interesting by the researcher-participant.

### *The Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage*

This next section revisits research questions Q2 through Q6. These questions focus on the transformative process participants experienced in relationship to the wilderness-centered rites of passage program. These questions explored the transformative process through the Gestalt therapy theory lens of experience that facilitates awareness, awareness that initiates meaning making (Fodor, 1998). The inquiry provided a series of case narratives that are descriptive of programmatic and participant experienced transformative processes. The inquiry process provided insight into the lived experiences as it generated awarenesses and meanings made from these awarenesses, transformations and applications to their greater life experience. Data was generated

through methods of participant observation, participant written journal entries, photo elicited interviews, and concurrent audio journal entries. These methods generated data through which thematic analyses, based in Phenomenological and Grounded Theory methods, were accomplished to create the program component focused case narratives which documented participants' transformative processes. Through revisiting the case narratives, this section further explores the analyses of themes and their interpretations through the research questions and their clinical applications further practice. Research questions Q2 through Q6 are:

Q2: What awarenesses did the participants' experience?

Q3: How did those awarenesses occur within the framework of the wilderness centered rites of passage experience?

Q4: What meaning do participants make of these awarenesses?

Q5: What meaning do participants make in translating and applying their experiences and awarenesses to their life experiences?

Q6: (a) What change or transformation do participants recognize from the experience?

(b) How did that change/transformation occur?

### *Group Program*

The following case narrative summaries, clinical interpretations and insights for practice focus on the themes and descriptive narratives from the group program. These case narratives include the program components of the drumming, hike and snowball fight, horses, hay bale fort, hike to the river, and medicine pouch. Following each of these

case narrative summaries, the discussion concludes with related clinical and practical applications and interpretations from the case narrative.

### *Drumming*

This activity was designed to initiate group cohesiveness and to open the group to expressiveness. Participants' descriptions provided themes of their sense of unity and holism in the action of drumming together. Throughout the activity, participants modulated from group to individual expression as each was given an opportunity to lead the group, explore new instruments which make a dominant sound, and make space for others to have center stage. One participant was strongly aligned with the drumming, giving expression as something he had integrated into his identity throughout his life experience. Aggression naturally emerged in their expressiveness of fast, loud and chaotic drumming. Finally, following their aggression and chaos, the facilitators asserted the energetic range and container, as revisited in different forms throughout the day. Establishment of energetic range and container supported group process and participants' self-regulation.

### *Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

The drumming activity served its purpose in design to support group cohesiveness and invite expressiveness in their process. Including drumming in the program design acted as an ice breaker, a way for participants to increase their comfort and engage in group process. The unity and holism that thematically emerged is indicative of this intention.

Facilitated drumming is aligned with the Gestalt therapy theory facets of experience that support developmental process (Wheeler, 1997). The facets of intersubjectivity and intimacy, were experienced through the shared drum; belonging and shame was directly experienced in the social construct of belonging, by making shared rhythm and keeping one's expression inclusive of all the others, as opposed to the natural exclusion by going off beat and out of sync with the rest of the group; gender and identity, was experienced in the rotating process of becoming dominant drum and then merging back into the ensemble, as identity drumming can be related to its cultural significance as it is a broadly represented practice in many, if not most, of the world's cultures; voice and narrative were evident when using the drum as a vehicle for expression, to communicate mood and feeling, and to tell one's story.

Aggression, an often precarious and uncomfortable aspect of human experience yet so important to the development of healthy and appropriate understanding and expression, was well served in the act of drumming. The facilitators' use of energetic range and container made the drumming a safe outlet for aggression. The drumming supported the participants to practice their range of aggressive expression, increasing their capacity for self-regulation in adapting behavior and exercising self-control.

#### *Hike and Snowball Fight*

This activity began as participants immersed themselves in the natural environment and their playfulness and excitement emerged and overtook them. This activity again called for assertion by the facilitators, as participants went to the high excitement extreme of an energetic pole, which required some containment through rounding them up and initiating natural consequences. Throughout the activity,



participants modulated between poles of high and low energetic behavior of intense wrestling, running, and throwing snowballs, to settling into the hills and behind trees, lying on the ground, observing and planning. The participants were resourceful in their capacity for adaptation as they utilized the natural environment to their advantage, striving to meet the presented challenges. They were often successful, teaming up and working together through their collaborative problem solving efforts.

*Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

Moving from the human constructed environment into nature was the crossing of a threshold, which asked for and allowed for a different way of being. Attention was drawn to the human-nature relationship as one gains distance from the built environment, opening to a sense of place within the gestalt of nature, as participants perceive themselves either as part of or apart from nature (Schroder, 2007). Are participants experiencing a sense of inclusion or differentiation as they move more deeply into the wilderness environment? This crossing of the threshold can be evocative for participants and deserves attention and mindfulness as participants make this transition. The high energy, excitement and aggression experienced by participants in this program, as they crossed this threshold, relates with aggression as depicted in Gestalt Therapy theory as the energy and excitement arising from contact. The participants were seeking security, satisfaction, and fulfillment through their aggressions, as they lacked ground for the contact they were experiencing (Lobb, 2007). Participants can experience a deepening of contact either as immersing into something in which they feel integrated or as they move through an increasingly foreign environment.

The energetic range and container was initiated both in the earlier experience by intervention from the facilitator and later by the participants' own actions. In the prior, this modulating between energetic polarities served to support participants by constructing ground and provided a container of expectations for conduct. In the latter, shifts from high activity to stillness in the natural environment gave opportunity for attention to sensation and deepening of awareness, providing ground in their process of immersion and deepening contact with the natural environment.

### *Horse Facilitated Challenge*

The descriptive narrative of this case study began with participants receiving instruction of logistics and safety. Next their experience led to approaching and interacting with the horse, again demonstrating the thematic energetic range and container in which safety necessitated their self-control and containment of their behavior, and attentive presence. By the design of this activity, participants again experienced challenges which required collaborative problem solving, as they were given facilitated tasks to accomplish. Through their efforts together and in interactions with the horse, Rojo, participants experienced emotions and relational connections. Aspects of emotion and relationship were dominant in the remainder of this case study, as participants reflected and described their experiences and perceptions of what was happening to themselves and to each other. Their empathy, attentiveness, and caring toward Rojo that was evoked after she cried as she was being pulled was a significant shift in the participants' focus of attention and interaction style. What also emerged, were participants' sense of their identities as they reflected on their own roles and actions in

relation to their deepening contact with Rojo, in interactions with each other, and how this was impactful to the greater systemic field, related to self at the contact boundary with other and environment.

*Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

Gestalt therapy theory describes the developmental and transformational processes of adolescence as development of the contact boundary. This development is represented in the three concurrent stages of differentiation, interiority, and integration (McConville, 1995). The experiences of the participants in this wilderness activity parallel the tasks of these stages. The wilderness activity, by its nature and its design, provided experiences to support development of the contact boundary; first the differentiation in approaching Rojo, their caution, sense of size difference, humans and horses are different animals, need for safety. Second, the awareness of interiority in recognizing their own feelings of increasing comfort, growing sense of safety, and increasing familiarity with Rojo. Lastly, integration occurred as participants began to interact more fully, making efforts to experiment and creatively adapt in the challenges presented to them and finally in their actions to repair the fractured sense of interpersonal relationship by their empathy, care, and attention after objectifying Rojo by forcefully pulling her.

Gestalt therapy theory, as inclusive of field theory (Lewin, 1951), describes the unit or focus of psychological inquiry to be at the dynamic, interactive field of organism and environment (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951). A further expansion is the developing theory which describes transformative processes and development happenings within the intersubjective relational field, with transformative process occurring as the

individual experiences of self, other, and environment (Jacobs, 2005). Experience and facilitated practice with horses as therapeutic activity, provides a constructed container for experience that is a rich, field full of potential and substance. The emergent themes of empathy, attention and caring, and transition from an I-It to an I-Thou relationship (Hycner, 1990) evidences transformational processes as the adolescents were deeply immersed in a relational field rich with the interpersonal substance. Facilitated experiences with horses generates a relational field of depth and richness, is clearly a phenomenon of the individual at the contact boundary, experiencing the dynamic interaction of self, other, and environment. As a practitioner of this work I feel fortunate and am grateful that this experience with Rojo was able to be included in this research, exemplifying the potential for the transformative process of nature-centered rites of passage.

### *Hay Bale Fort*

This case study began narrating the participants' transition into the barn and their shifting to a strong interest in the hay bales. This introduced the facilitation choice and theme of spontaneous organic process, as the facilitator chose to go with the participants' interest and initiation of self-directed activity in building the hay bale fort. The hay bale fort activity became a significant challenge, again requiring participants to work together as a team and engage in a collaborative problem solving process. Participants spoke with pride, giving attention to the sizable mental and physical efforts required to achieve their goal. As the hay bale fort materialized, participants were increasingly excited and in the interviews reflected on their sense of industriousness and accomplishments. Participants

made meaning by relating their efforts to their greater life experiences, reflecting on their individual strengths and their group efforts.

*Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

In application, this activity of building a hay bale fort, viewed from a Gestalt therapy practice perspective, was an example of a complex creative experiment. As the facilitator, I leaned into my growing edge, letting go of control and my agenda, not knowing what was going to happen, trusting the energy and the naturally unfolding process. The participants then had the room to follow their interest, engage in self-directed activity, and participate in a creative and collaborative process. According to Joseph Zinker (1977);

Gestalt Therapy is really permission to be creative. Our basic methodological tool is the experiment. ...The experiment moves to the heart of resistance, transforming rigidity into an elastic support system for the person. (p. 6)

In contribution to Gestalt therapy theory, Zinker also described the transformative process in creativity and the making art, of which the hay bale activity serves as an example.

The creative process is therapeutic in itself because it allows us to express and examine the content and dimensions of our internal lives. We live full lives to the degree to which we find the full range of vehicles which concretize, symbolize, and otherwise give expression to our experiences. ...Making art is a way of concretizing our need for a broader and deeper range of living. In the process of creating, we stretch our psyches, touching the both personal and archetypal aspects of our origins. (Zinker, 1977, p. 8-9)

In my speculation, the hay bale activity exemplified a vision of fully living for an early adolescent male. It was an ultimate in constructive aggression, collaborative and interdependent process, intensive mental and physical efforts, and the sense of

industriousness that actualized their positive sense of self. I smile when reflecting on the fulfillment of childhood play fantasy, using giant building blocks to create a life size fort with a secret passage. Wow! I really enjoyed that.

### *Hike to the River*

This case narrative had several components of activity including hiking, exploring nature and environment, meditative practice, and the destruction and casting into the river of the ice sheets. The data generated from participants only focused on the aspects of destruction and casting ice sheets into the river. The remaining components of hiking, exploring, and meditative practice were included in the descriptive narrative, while the analysis of themes focused on only the destruction and casting of the ice sheets. The participants' reflections focused on the process of working together with the ice sheets, recognizing their teamwork and collaborative problem solving efforts in the accomplishment of their goal. The breaking up and casting of the ice into the river became metaphoric of life experiences and facilitated emotional release, as reported in participants' descriptions of their experience. Lastly the river experience was strongly aligned with the continuous emergent theme of aggression. In their reflections, the participants reported their perceptions of the role and meaning of aggression in their greater life experiences.

### *Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

In facilitating programs that immerse participants in the natural environment, it is important to acknowledge and attend to issues of risk and safety. A field of ice sheets on the somewhat sloped bank of a flowing river at below freezing temperatures was an

environment of risk. The risks and the concerns for safety were made completely apparent to participants. Much effort was given to attention and clarity of boundaries for safety at the rivers edge. The container for safety was found in the high ratio of adult facilitators to adolescent participants, in the vigilance and the positioning of facilitators, and in the continuous redirection and prompting of participants toward self-awareness of their movement and proximity to the river's edge. Upon entering any natural environment, assessment and intervention to assure safety is the initial act and primary priority of a competent facilitator.

Viewed as clinical practice the river activity served to give participants the opportunity to express and experience destructive aggression. During their interviews, the participants acknowledged and reflected on their experiences of healthy aggression. Gestalt therapy theory perceives healthy aggression as an act of structuring and assimilating gestalts.

When the gestalt is fully clarified, our active ego functions and receptive id functions are balanced. We are neither guiding the figure nor being guided; rather, we are the figure at that moment; we are at once the dancer and the dance. In the final stage of gestalt formation, the gestalt is assimilated, digested, and thus destroyed. (Brothers, 1986, p.580)

Participants' actions at the river with the ice sheets exemplified this description of the role of healthy aggression in assimilation. Participants' expressions of healthy aggression were an indication of their experiencing a transformative process within the wilderness-centered rites of passage activities. As a concluding experience of the outdoor portion of the program, participants' aggressive expression and recognition of their own emotional release in that process, fits into the gestalt cycle of experience, supporting their

integration and assimilation of their experience, the awarenesses and meaning made in the their transformative process.

The experience of healthy aggression, that is, forming gestalts more complexly and independently, helps the adolescent to find and coalesce his or her own way, style, and pattern of gestalt formation. (Brothers, 1986, p.582)

### *Medicine Pouch*

This activity concluded the overall group program. In practice, a medicine pouch has a significant role in most rites of passage programs, as it is an experiencing of sacred tools and knowledge, elevating participants' status with introduction into esoteric practice. The medicine pouch activity in this dissertation research initially required further intervention concerning energetic range and container as participants were hyperactive and silly then focused and settled as the medicine pouches were introduced. Participants' curiosities increased as they engaged in exploration of their new medicine pouches and the objects shared from the facilitator's own medicine pouch. Their curiosity and sense of joining through initiation in the story of Two Wolves and use of sacred tools to evoke personal strengths were thematic in the descriptive narrative of this portion of the program. This consideration on strengths became the focus in dialogue through which participants were then guided to reflect on their experiences of other activities and relate the strengths that emerged to the sacred tools and then to apply them to their greater life experiences.

### *Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

In interpreting this narrative, it is important to acknowledge my error in data collection. In the process of the activity and in the latter interviews with participants I



was not focusing on the medicine pouch experience itself, but rather in its use as a tool for reflection on other activities. Due to this, there is a lack of data that provides participants' direct experiences, awarenesses and meanings they had from the activity. The descriptive data of the actual medicine pouch activity was generated from participant observation only.

In facilitation of this program, I do feel the medicine pouch activity was efficacious in supporting reflective process, integration, and closure of the program. Further as an aspect of the initiation process of the rites of passage, it served to provide passage into esoteric practice and mark the significance of participant experience. Having something material for participants to keep from the experience supported the continuity of impact. Revisiting and reflecting on their experiences of the transformative process through use of a power object is an ongoing opportunity for participants to evoke the acquired strengths, awarenesses, and meaning made as they move forward in their lives.

In summary of the group responses addressing research questions Q2 through Q6, the participants became aware of their behaviors and feelings in relation to self and to others, including a horse. The awarenesses were facilitated by the group elements of wilderness-centered rites of passage experience. They made meaning of the affects of their behaviors and emotions as metaphors for other life experiences.

### *Individual Program*

The following case narrative summaries and clinical interpretations and insights for practice focus on the themes and descriptive narrative from the individual program.

These case narratives include river, hike, solo in the cave, tree, and vine. Following each of these case narrative summaries, the discussion includes related clinical and practical applications and interpretations from the case narrative.

### *River*

The individual experience began with a descent toward the river. At this time participants experienced and participated in a ritual of spirituality and reverence for nature as an offering of tobacco was given and participants set intentions. Spirituality and reverence for nature was identified as thematic in the participants' reports of their experiences throughout this program. Participants experienced a sense of calming and peacefulness as they sat by the river. In their communion at the river and with other elements in the program participants described their experiences of a non-ordinary reality that was evoked in the various practices and rituals. Participants' experiences at the river were reflected upon as evocative of and as a means of support for emotional management and release. The participants described seeking further experience with the river element and its usefulness to their life experiences.

### *Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

The theme of non-ordinary reality speaks to a shift in perception as participants move through the stages of rites of passage. Introducing a ritual practice that directs participants' attention to reverence of nature, sets a ground for the opening and softening to experiences. The shifting of setting in the descent toward the river and sitting at the river's edge provided a sense-altering experience. The descent and communion with the river was representative of the separation state and entering into the liminal state of the rites of passage experiences (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). The descent represented

the crossing of a threshold as the stairway begins to symbolically descend into another perceptual state. Participants leave one world behind them to enter into a new one. Being in close proximity to the intensity of the rushing river facilitated a further altering of senses and continued the consciousness-shifting experience that contributed to the liminal state. This perceptual shift supported an opening for the participants to experience emotion and deepen their intrapsychic awareness in a safe and structured container. A sense-altering, consciousness-shifting experience facilitated a state of greater openness, allowing for the ritual process to continue, immersing participants into non-ordinary reality. Through ritual practice at the river, participants were supported to access creativity and imagination. Evoking fantasy into the waking world acted as a vehicle for furthering the potential for transformation, as participants were given a container that broadened their capacity for adaption to the intrapsychic challenges that surfaced in the rites of passage activities.

At the river, the participants experienced a soothing and softening of self, with the moving and swirling river, activating a movement and stirring of self. Sitting at the river's edge and casting in seeds was a facilitated act that supported experiencing emotions in a safe structure. Gestalt Therapy theory views emotions as integral with and experienced as a whole organism phenomenon, directly in response to the organism-environment field. As a direct component of regulation, emotions function in relating, coping, and making contact with the world. Emotions act as a guide toward unification and fulfillment of gestalts, as they serve to support and direct the individuals through the cycle of experience to then be discharged in its completion (Meriman, 1974).

In comparison to a Gestalt-oriented rites of passage experience, Holloman (1974) stated that in relation to the liminal aspects of the experience:

Ritual manipulation of emotion can result in ‘psychic opening,’ a state in which the individual's defenses are suddenly lowered. An individual in this state is vulnerable and suggestible, and major shifts in his psychic configurations can occur. When ritualized psychic opening exists as a part of a cultural event-pattern for the purpose of inducing psycho-behavioral transformation in individuals, the process can be considered as a type of rite of passage. (Hollman, 1974, p. 265)

### *Hike*

This next narrative describes hiking to the next area of activity. The terrain of this hike was metaphoric of the ascent within the rites of passage model, the elevating of self through experience and heightening awareness. This sense of ascent is representative in the participants’ thematic description of experiencing challenge and achievement in traversing the difficult trail. Participant narrative described personal experiences on this hike that generated awareness of participants’ physicalities. They narrated a phenomenon in which their attention became focused to present-centered experience as their process in movement became more mindful of self and of the environment.

### *Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

This hiking experience had a practical focus, since it supported the transformative process through its utility in developing awareness and in this program supported participants to transition into their solo in the cave. Hiking outdoors, as awareness based practice, is supporting of attention to self and environment. Moving in nature and adapting to the constantly changing terrain requires ongoing attention. Movement with attention develops awareness or mindfulness of physical sensation which supports one to

increase presence. The achievement in the challenge experience of traversing the difficult terrain supports positive self concept and a sense of self-efficacy.

The utility of hiking, as supporting participants to make transitions into the solo in the cave, was multifaceted. It supported participants to increase their awareness of self, to evoke a present centered orientation, and to generate a sense of achievement in the face of challenge. The experience of achievement in challenge helped participants to begin the solo experience with a “can do” attitude, increasing comfort and reducing resistance. Participants, in a present-center orientation, were supported in reducing the angst of alone time. The mindfulness and self-awareness practice of hiking was shifted from awareness in movement to the awareness of settling, stillness, and the introspective state.

#### *Solo in the Cave*

Again, participants experienced a metaphoric ascent as they approached the cave, representative of higher self and greater knowing within the wilderness centered rites of passage model. Further metaphor in the terrain of the cave represented one’s own experiential edge, stepping beyond the familiar into the unknown, unseen and undiscovered. Participants each spent 20-30 minutes in the cave, and exhibited an observable change in mood, affect, and temperament on their return. The participants described a sense of peacefulness and calming as they communed and experienced harmony with nature in the cave. Participants’ narratives strongly indicated evoking of non-ordinary reality as they described their awarenesses and the meaning of their experiences in the cave. Making meaning of the cave experience drew participants to reflect on the balance and interconnection of nature’s cycles. A described sense of

isolation from the human world welled up in participants and led to making meaning in a sense of place among the time and grandeur of nature. The narrative further gave expression to a sense of voice among nature's elementals as participants described being heard by all living things around them.

*Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

The dominant feature of the solo experience was the sense of solitude. Solitude was further heightened by the isolation and limiting of senses in the cave, which served to deepen their emersion into the wilderness of their own intrapsychic. It is a psychological challenge to be with oneself in the solitude of the solo experience and in life experiences, in general. Overcoming the aversion and discomfort is empowering, as it deepens ones awareness of and comfort with self. Broadening capacity and the availability of self to the self is transformational in the support of one's development toward potential. The solo experience is directed toward self-reflection. In this research, the solo experience was designed to be transcendent, supporting participants to face the mirror and look within. In experiencing their own process, each participant emerged from within, transitioning from a profound sense of aloneness to a perceived interconnectedness with all things. A sense of communion with nature and spirit, a sense of reception of their expressive voice by the elementals, and a vehicle of fantasy led participants outward from the interiority and darkness, to communion and an enlightening sense of self.

Throughout these activities fantasy was intertwined with non-ordinary reality as participants experienced and communed with elemental nature, transitioning from a sense of isolation and aloneness, to a sense of holism and interconnectedness between self and

nature. Gestalt therapy theory's use of fantasy as a tool to broaden and deepen awareness of self is described by Frantz (1983);

As we move into the realm of metaphor and fantasy we come in touch with an entirely different type of awareness, with a novel approach to authenticity. In effect we dispense in part with the cognitive function and focus instead on the intuitive part of the self. (p.283)

In this, having self-expression in being heard by all of nature, participants were able to create a sounding board for their intrapsychic experience. Fantasy as further discussed in Gestalt therapy theory as a support for youth in exploring, having insight, and developing awareness of process.

Through fantasy we can have fun with the child and we can also find out what a child's process is. Usually her fantasy process (how she does things and moves around in her fantasy world) is the same as her life process. We can look into the inner realms of the child's being through fantasy. We can bring out what is kept hidden or avoided and we can also find out what's going on in the child's life from her perspective. For these reasons we encourage fantasy and use it as a therapeutic tool. (Oaklander, 1978, p. 11)

### *Tree*

In this case narrative component, the participants experienced a great tree. They rested, cradled in her roots as they looked up the massive trunk toward her expansive canopy of branches. Participants discussed the anthropomorphic qualities and metaphysical properties of the great tree and further received instruction in meditative practice in relation to the tree. As participants were cradled by the tree and engaged in meditative practice, they reported a sense of soothing stillness overcome them. They described experiencing a mother-like nurturing from the tree that filled them with a sense of protection and safety. They made meaning in discussing this experience as indicative of the aspects of support one receives through experience with nature.

After their time with the great tree, two participants discovered a large hanging vine. Both began swinging, exploring, and experimenting with the vine. They described this experience as significant to their overall experience and expressed their related feelings of enthusiasm, fun and excitement. One of the participants made meaning of the vacillations of swinging on the vine relating to taking the path of least resistance in life. This experience again brought to light the theme of spontaneous organic process, as time on the vine was unplanned and the facilitator allowed an unfolding of participants' curiosity and natural process.

The conclusion of the individual program was a hike deeper into the woods that eventually led participants back to the place of origin where the day began.

*Clinical meaning of results, how this informs practice*

These final experiences of the wilderness centered rites of passage program were evident and representative of the therapeutic and healing qualities of nature. The experience with the tree was metaphoric of Mother Nature reaching for and embracing her child. Having a sense of safety and protection, being cared for, soothed, and nurtured were aspects of healing evoked by the deep emersion into nature. As a phenomenon, presence in nature simply provided for what we need as a source for transformation. Just show up and be willing to receive.

As a facilitation choice allowing for the emerging experience with the vine was to trust the process. This allowing for and following of participants interests and attention was empowering for participants, fostering independence and internal authority. Following the participants' natural flow demonstrated faith in intuition and trust in the guidance that participants can intuitively know and access what they need. As a facilitator



following, trusting and allowing gave the participants a container to access their own resources.

In summary of the individual responses addressing research questions Q2 through Q6, the participants gained awarenesses of the metaphor or nature. The framework offered experiences with the river, the hike, the cave, and the tree that facilitated an immersion into the nature and the rites of passage process. The participants were able to experience trust in self, trust in the process and trust in intuitively knowing their supports. They experienced the value of container and the polarities of high energy and serenity, not only in the wilderness centered rites of passage program, but also in future life experiences.

### Further Research and Applications

#### *The Research Process*

As I was going through this research process, I became curious about aspects of the research methods being used as tools to support the transformative process. Specifically, this curiosity is centered on the photo data collection and the photo-elicited interviews. These were used as tools of documentation of transformative process. The photos drew attention to what was representative of their experiences as they considered what to photograph. Secondly, the photos represented their awarenesses and the meanings made as they were being interviewed. Did these methods have a role or influence or contribution to enhancing the transformative process that had been studied? Was there a compounding influence of the research methods on the participants' transformative processes? Their participation in the research process perhaps enhanced

their process of developing awareness and meaning as they attended to what was representative by taking photos and in reflecting on their experiences.

As a facilitator of wilderness-centered rites of passage programs, I am inclined to continue to explore and incorporate the use of photography in future research methods to support participants, perhaps conducting a comparison study of outcomes with and without photographs. As a clinician reflecting on clinical applications of methods that enhance transformative process, I remain curious about these methods as a psycho-therapeutic tool. Photo documentation and elicitation in this dissertation was used as a tool for developing awareness. In psycho-therapeutic practice my curiosity leads to inquire about the efficacy of photo-elicitation as psycho-education, as an experiential tool for self-awareness, and as an experiment for clients to explore their own phenomenology.

Journal entries played a significant role in the data collection process of this dissertation. A shift from written journals to audio journal entries was made between the group and individual programs. Participants expressed some resistance to written journaling, complaining “it was too much like school.” As a researcher, I felt data from journal entries would have more richness and depth as audio recordings given participant resistance to the creating written journals. This turned out to be true and the audio journal entries yielded more data with richer and more depthful content. The audio journal entries further allowed participants to document their experiences, awarenesses, and meaning making more directly.

Audio journals are recommended for use in future research of this kind over written journal entries for the quality of data collected. If written materials are necessary to the research design, however, an alternative would be to work with a participant

population committed to and experienced with writing as a personal growth tool. Another alternative could be to link participation into a school assignment for which participants receive credit dependent on effort and participation.

### *Further Research of the Wilderness Centered Rites of Passage Model*

Further qualitative studies could begin by broadening the participant pool beyond the white male suburban youth of this study. Accessing participants from other demographics would provide a broader and more diverse lens into the transformative process of the wilderness centered rites of passage program. The participants of this study were early adolescent males. As for a comparative study into perceived transformative process, gender based or age based studies could be implemented. This program and research model applied to an all female, mixed gender, or groups of different ages. Studies with populations based on race, ethnicity, or religion could be designed around specific components of identity development within the wilderness centered rites of passage program. This could be accomplished by including aspects of culture and facilitators representative of status within those cultures. Lastly, a positive direction for research would be a study that explores transformative processes within the wilderness-centered rites of passage model for participants with ability challenges, investigating the potential for personal support with such a model.

Another area of research and application for transformative process within the wilderness-centered rites of passage model could be in service to youth at risk. How does this model serve as support in overcoming trauma and abuse? Efforts of research toward this might include creating case studies of participants' individual experience as they go

through such a program, providing narrative focusing on transmutation of abuse and trauma experiences. A study of this model assisting in development of the strengths that align with resiliency could also provide evidence toward this as practice. How is this model supportive in reducing symptoms of and increasing coping with mental health disorders? Specific studies providing evidence of the utility of this program to support participants meeting criteria for diagnoses such as conduct disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and substance abuse disorders, prevalent in the youth population. Such research applications could further the goal for the wilderness-centered rites of passage model to be of service to youth at risk.

#### *Contributions to Gestalt Therapy Theory*

This dissertation has demonstrated the use of Gestalt therapy techniques and methodology in support of the adolescent transformative process. The medium of wilderness centered rites of passage was enhanced by use of and in collaboration with Gestalt therapy. Facilitators of wilderness based therapies would be served by training in Gestalt therapy. Gestalt therapy theory would be served by expanding and incorporating wilderness therapy into its methods.

Gestalt therapy methods used in the facilitation of a rites of passage program could serve to support participants in becoming embodied in their experience, deepen their awareness of the transformative process, and support the meaning making by evoking the authentic self. Bringing Gestalt therapy out of the office and into a natural setting would broaden the field and expand potential.

One goal of this dissertation was to further the body of literature in Gestalt research for both possible content of study and in research methods. As stated in Chapter Three, 3 influences of Gestalt therapy theory on the research methodology of this dissertation were researcher as instrument, collaboration between researcher and participant, and the common theoretical foundation of Phenomenological Research. My experience as an instrument for this research is represented by a quote from Brown (1997) and is an expression of gratitude for my Gestalt training supporting me, carrying me through this dissertation in my role as qualitative researcher.

Gestalt fundamentals provide advantageous training for researchers of qualitative methodology in using themselves as their own instrument. Trained Gestalt therapists have much to offer in the areas of awareness, actuality, complexity, personal responsibility, and staying with the process. These are all desirable skills for the qualitative researcher. (Brown, 1997, p. 71)

The holism of Gestalt therapy theory was reflected in this dissertation through the multiplicity of roles of all individuals involved in the participatory collaborative research process. This was furthered in the interconnection and integration of the participants in the research process and in the transformative process. This dissertation as phenomenological research is representative of Gestalt therapy theory becoming full for me - from the study of phenomenon as foundational in Gestalt therapy, back to Gestalt therapy becoming foundational in the study of phenomenon through this research process. This dissertation can serve as a model that phenomenological research can be further utilized in demonstrating the aspects and utility of Gestalt therapy in theory, technique, and practice. I hope these influences will continue to resonate in the field of Gestalt therapy in collaboration with qualitative research.

*Progressive Contributions, Furthering Research and Practice*

As a researcher and therapeutic practitioner, the heuristic phenomenological inquiry method (Moustakas, 1994) offers contributions of great utility in supporting the process of this dissertation. For therapeutic practice and research, this method of inquiry and presentation of experiential phenomenon can increase the potential for developing awareness, presenting and making meaning of experience. In practice, as in the wilderness centered rites of passage experiences, the heuristic phenomenological inquiry can offer a multiplicity of tools for self-examination and self-expression, enhancing the developmental process. For Gestalt therapy practice, as well, its multi-media sources can support deepening exploration to develop awareness and insight, to achieve a broad and depthful gestalt. Heuristic phenomenology is a creative process, only enhanced by collaborative designs. As a therapeutic practitioner and researcher, a heuristic phenomenological approach offers opportunity for shared work and relationship. This dissertation presented a heuristic phenomenology design by combining diverse method, theory, and practice. It was shared with and supported by participants and other practitioners. This creative synthesis is represented by a composite of rites of passage, wilderness therapy, Gestalt Therapy theory, existential phenomenology, participatory research theory, photography, journal entries, interview, group dialogue, participant observation, drumming, creating a horse obstacle course, building of a hay bale fort, deconstructing and casting ice sheets, sharing and teaching of the medicine pouch, communion with elemental nature, and the creative adaptations to the naturally occurring experiences and challenges of nature.

## Final Thoughts, Reflections, and Conclusions

At this time of environmental crisis there is an ever increasing shift in orientation and awareness of nature and environmental responsibility. Wilderness-centered rites of passage programs can serve to facilitate this shift in orientation and deepen an awareness of our relationship with nature and the human/environment interrelationship. This shift is from an I-It relationship to an I-Thou relationship between person and environment, humanity and Earth. This shift can be initiated and supported through the wilderness centered rites of passage model. Wilderness centered rites of passage can serve the need for ongoing ritual to mark individual and societal shifts in our relationship with Nature.

In the context of this dissertation, we need our green space, our wilderness, to support the healthy development of our children. This dissertation has offered a healthy blueprint of developmental experiences through nature as a medium for transformative processes for our youth. Further, this is a model that encourages the development of community parks and neighborhood outdoor recreational areas. My goal is to further research that advocates increasing development of the neighborhood nature center and the collaboration of developmental and therapeutic practice with the parks systems in our communities, regions, and states.

### *Reflexive Statement*

In returning to the park with the path where the individual program took place, to make conclusions of this dissertation research process, I offer the following reflections:

I walk down this wilderness path, this path that I've walked more than 25 years of my life. In nature, a real path of ground, of rock, of earth,

trees, along a river. I feel my soul well up within me. What I've shed.  
What I've become. I will continue to walk.

As I enter nature, I recognize myself crossing a threshold and immersing myself. I reflect on how I bring this into my daily practice to know I am continuously transforming. Truly it is a gift of nature to see the ongoing transformations in life. Each time to step through and stand within, nature heals. It is with deep gratitude I reflect on my experience of writing this dissertation, able to share with others these gifts of nature. Bring people here, a place of wilderness, in nature's presence, to stand with nature.

Throughout the last eight years, I have been fortunate to join community in nature each season. This rite of passage, an initiation with a circle of others, has sustained and supported me through this time in my life. It has been a parallel to writing this dissertation, and a parallel to the rites of passage of doctoral education.

This dissertation is a threshold that I've crossed. It was vehicle that has given me voice for my passions, for what I love in life, the sharing of nature, the transformative process, to grow and to heal. I have been able to develop and articulate a method I practice in my life and as a clinician a practice to support others. The expression of gratitude wells up within me and washes over me as I cross this threshold.

The river offers bitter sweetness, looking behind, knowing that when we return we will never be as we once were. True transformation, of



shedding and letting go. Celebrating what I've become. The river, as it flows by, relieves the heaviness of life. Heals what ails. Lets those things pass through us that hold us back. The rushing of the river fills us with the connection to all life. The sound. The spray. The water itself, coming up. The rushing flow enlivens. The gentle meandering in the softer spots helps us to settle.

As I approach the cave in which the solo experiences took place, I know of myself, more deeply into nature. I sense as I immerse myself, I move closer and closer, become full with what is sacred. Nature fills me with what is sacred.

I sit in the tree, I am held, I am soothed, connected by roots deeply in the earth, drawn above, by reaching branches stretching and touching the sky. I feel my center, like the trunk of the tree. Beginning and ending with a tree, full circle.

Walking a path I've walked since I was the age of the boys whose voices you have heard from the wilderness. What I've been. What I've become. I will still walk. I will continue to walk this path.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A



# Cleveland State University

College of Graduate Studies and Research

Office of Sponsored Programs and Research

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

## Memorandum

To: Sarah Toman  
CASAL  
RT 1357

From: Daniel P. O'Donnell, M.Ed.  
Institutional Review Board  
Office of Sponsored Programs & Research

Date: 7 December 2007

Re: Results of IRB Review of your project number: **28117-TOM-HS**

Co-Investigator: **Adam Roth**

Entitled: **A Gestalt oriented phenomenologica and participatory study of the transformative process of adolescent participants following wilderness centered rites of passage**

The IRB has reviewed and approved your application for the above named project, under the category noted below. Approval for use of human subjects in this research is for one year from the approval date listed below.

**If your study (i.e. collection of data) will extend beyond the one year authorization, it is your responsibility to notify the IRB and request an extension. Please be aware that data collected outside of authorized dates may not be used.**

***This approval expires at 12:01 am on 12/6/2008.***

By accepting this decision, you agree to notify the IRB of: (1) any additions to or changes in procedures for your study that modify the subjects' risk in any way; and (2) any events that affect that safety or well-being of subjects.

Thank you for your efforts to maintain compliance with the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects.

---

### Approval Category:

Date: 12/6/2007

- ☐ Exempt Status: Project is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.101
- ☐ Expedited Review: Project approved, Expedited Category
- ☒ Regular IRB Approval

cc: Project file

Mailing Address: 2121 Euclid Avenue, KB 1150 • Cleveland, Ohio 44115-2214  
Campus Location: Keith Building, Room 1150 • 1621 Euclid Avenue • Cleveland, Ohio  
(216) 687-3630 • Fax (216) 687-9382

## Appendix B

### Parental Consent Form

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Adam Roth and I am working on my doctorate in Counseling Psychology at Cleveland State University. For my dissertation research, I am exploring rites of passage among adolescents. I am asking your permission for your child to participate in a research process documenting the effects and impacts of his or her experience going through Tree Bear's Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage Program. The purpose of this research process is to learn more about how the process of development unfolds in a wilderness program, and I hope also to gain about how this particular program affects people. The results I obtain are intended to do two things: to support further program development and to contribute to the body of knowledge in the counseling discipline about programs such as this.

Your child will be participating in a one day program on the grounds of Pebble Ledge Farm in Novelty, Ohio. This will begin with arrival at 9:00 AM on Saturday, February 23, 2008 and conclude Saturday, February 23, 2008 at 8:00 PM. You will be asked to provide transportation to and from Pebble Ledge Farm at the beginning and conclusion of each trip (directions will be provided). It is approximately a 40 minute drive from Cleveland Heights.

Should your child choose to discontinue their participation in the program their decision will be honored and supported, you will be contacted by phone and arrangements will be made to have you pick them up or be transported to their home. If they choose to stay on the site but not continue in the current program activity, their decision will be honored and supported. They will be provided with supervision, any assistance needed, and a comfortable place to be (tent, farmhouse, or fire circle).

As part of the research process participants will be asked to complete journal entries, take photographs, be interviewed, and discuss their experience with the other participants in groups. They will further have opportunity to have learning and influence through the data analysis and presentation process.

As a doctoral student at Cleveland State University, I am also interested in presenting the findings from the data as my dissertation research requirement. Dissertation research frequently includes publishing findings in professional journals. The data your child generates will remain confidential. Your child's name will not be collected or appear anywhere in the data or presentations. Only program facilitators will know which materials were generated by your child.

Your consent and your child's participation are completely voluntary and your child may withdraw at any time. There is no reward for participating or consequence for not participating, beyond the educational value of learning and participation in this program and research process.

For further information regarding this research, please contact Dr. Sarah Toman at (216) 687-4615, email: s.toman@csuohio.edu, or Adam Roth at (216) 225-8376 or by email: adamroth@roadrunner.com.

If you have any questions about your rights or child's right as a research participant you may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.

There are two copies of this letter. If you agree to allow your child to participate, please sign each below. After signing both, keep one copy for your records and return the other one to the researcher (Adam Roth). Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Parent's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C

### Assent to Participate in Research

Dear Student:

My name is Adam Roth and I am working on my doctorate in Counseling Psychology at Cleveland State University. For my dissertation research, I am exploring rites of passage among pre-teens and teens. I am inviting you to participate in Tree Bear's Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage Program. I'm doing this project to learn more about how kids grow and what kinds of changes they make while they are in a program like the Tree Bear program.

You will be participating in a one day program on the grounds of Pebble Ledge Farm in Novelty, Ohio. This will begin with arrival at 9:00 AM on Saturday, February 23, 2008 and conclude Saturday, February 23, 2008 at 8:00 PM.

Participation in this program and research process is voluntary, which means you do not have to take part if you don't want to. Nothing will happen to you if you decide not to participate.

If you decide you want to quit before the weekend is over, your parents will be contacted by phone and arrangements will be made to get you home. If you choose to stay on the site but not continue in the current program activity, your decision will be honored and supported. You will be provided with a comfortable place to be (tent, farmhouse, or fire circle).

As part of the research process you will be asked to complete journal entries, take photographs, and discuss your experience with the other participants in groups during the program. In addition you will be asked to participate in an interview within 1 week after the program, for about 1 hour.

All the writing and pictures you create will be confidential. Your name will not be collected or appear anywhere and your identity will not be revealed in anyway.

over

Please read the following and sign below if you agree to participate.

I understand that:

- if I don't want to participate in the research process, I won't get into trouble or be asked to leave the Wilderness program
- anytime that I want to stop participating in the research is ok
- my name will not be known and information will be completely private

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please Print)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

There are two copies of this letter. After signing them, keep one copy for your records and return the other one. Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

For further information regarding this research please contact Dr. Sarah Toman at (216) 687-4615, email: [s.toman@csuohio.edu](mailto:s.toman@csuohio.edu), or Adam Roth at (216) 225-8376, email: [adamroth@roadrunner.com](mailto:adamroth@roadrunner.com).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.

Appendix D

**Tree Bear's Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage Permission Slip**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Name

My child has permission to attend and participate in the Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage Program offered by the Tree Bear Institute.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I give permission for my child to participate and be in photographs and interviews, to create journal entries of their experience that will be used for the study of any transformational processes of the program.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Work Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Please check below IF your child has sensitivity to:

☐ Bee Sting ☐ Nuts ☐ Dairy ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Required medications:

\_\_\_\_\_

Please check below IF your child has:

☐ Asthma ☐ Diabetes ☐ Kidney Injuries ☐ Seizure Disorder ☐ Heart Condition  
☐ Other Medical Condition \_\_\_\_\_

I, parent/guardian, am responsible to provide for my child's medication needs and allergy precautions for these programs. I further understand that this program occurs in outdoor locations and understand the related needs and precautions for my child.

---

Parent/Guardian Signature

---

Date

### **Waiver of Liability for the Tree Bear Institute and It's Facilitator Associates**

We (parent/guardian and participant) understand participating in the Wilderness-Centered Rites of Passage Program has certain risks and dangers that may arise. These include, but are not limited to, transportation in a vehicle, the hazards of walking in outdoor and wooded areas, of climbing hills, of going into caves, of being in close proximity to horses, of being out-of-doors in unpredictable conditions amongst the forces of nature.

We recognize that unanticipated situations and problems can arise on these programs, such situations or problems are not reasonably within the control of the supervising/facilitating staff and volunteers. We further agree to release and hold harmless supervising/facilitating staff and volunteers, the Tree Bear Institute and their agents, officers, employees, and volunteers, from any and all liability, claims, suits, demands, judgments, costs, interest and expense (including attorneys' fees and costs) arising from such activities, including any accident or injury to the participant and the costs of medical services.

In the event of an injury requiring medical attention, I hereby grant permission to the supervising/facilitating staff (including volunteers) to attend to my son/daughter. If the injury warrants further medical attention, I expect every effort will be made to contact me to receive my specific authorization before action is taken. If efforts to contact me are unsuccessful, I grant permission for necessary first aide treatment to be given. In addition, I hereby give my permission to the supervising/facilitating staff (including volunteers) to take my child to the physician, dentist, or to the hospital if an accident or serious illness occurs on the trip and I cannot be located.

---

Parent/Guardian Signature

---

Date

## Release of Liability and Assumption of All Risks

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby acknowledge that I am aware that during the nature program presented by Adam Roth and the horse experience *presented by Jackie Stevenson at Pebble Ledge ranch* I will be participating in certain risks and dangers may arise. These include, but are not limited to, the hazards of walking in wooded areas with no clearly defined paths or walkways, of climbing hills, of being out-of-doors in unpredictable conditions amongst the forces of nature, and horses and of accident or illness in remote areas without means of rapid evacuation or medical facilities. I am also aware and clearly understand that the *Nature program presented by Adam Roth and the Horse experience* presented by Jackie Stevenson, which includes its employees, contractors, and agents, will have no liability regarding provision of medical care or the adequacy of any care that may be rendered.

I am voluntarily participating in these activities with knowledge of the dangers involved and hereby agree to accept any and all risks including injury and death.

As lawful consideration for the Agreement with the *Horses and nature program* to participate in such trips and activities, I hereby agree that I will not make a claim against or sue for bodily injury, emotional trauma, death, and/or property damage resulting from negligence or other acts, however caused, as a result of my participation in the seminar program. I therefore release and discharge *Nature Program and Horse experience* and its agents, contractors, and employees from all claims, actions, and demands of any nature whatsoever that I may have (including claims for bodily death or property damage) arising from my participation in this seminar program.

The Release of Liability and Assumption of All Risks Agreement is also entered into on behalf of any minors accompanying me. This Agreement is binding on my heirs, legal representatives, and assigns.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_Name of Minor Participant\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or other Legal Guardian      Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**This signed release is a prerequisite f Release of Liability and  
Assumption of All Risks**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby acknowledge that I

am aware that during the nature program presented by Adam Roth and the horse experience *presented by Jackie Stevenson at Pebble Ledge ranch* I will be participating in certain risks and dangers may arise. These include, but are not limited to, the hazards of walking in wooded areas with no clearly defined paths or walkways, of climbing hills, of being out-of-doors in unpredictable conditions amongst the forces of nature, and horses and of accident or illness in remote areas without means of rapid evacuation or medical facilities. I am also aware and clearly understand that the *Nature program presented by Adam Roth and the Horse experience* presented by Jackie Stevenson, which includes its employees, contractors, and agents, will have no liability regarding provision of medical care or the adequacy of any care that may be rendered.

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The Release of Liability and Assumption of All Risks Agreement is also entered into on behalf of any minors accompanying me. This Agreement is binding on my heirs, legal representatives, and assigns.

Name of Minor Participant \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or other Legal Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**This signed release is a prerequisite for participation in the program.**