

Walking Home:

Women's Transformative Experiences in the Wilderness of the Appalachian Trail

By

Merry J. Coburn

A dissertation submitted

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in Psychology

Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

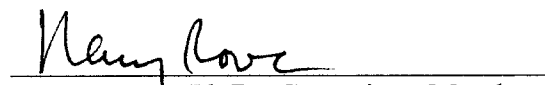
Palo Alto, California

February 5, 2006

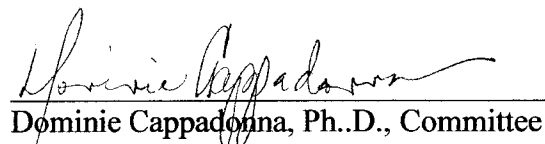
I certify that I have read and approved the content and presentation of this dissertation:


Irene Lazarus, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson

4/6/06
Date


Nancy Rowe, Ph.D., Committee Member

4/25/06
Date


Dominic Cappadona, Ph.D., Committee Member

4/18/06
Date

UMI Number: 3221761

Copyright 2006 by
Coburn, Merry J.

All rights reserved.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 3221761

Copyright 2006 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Copyright © Merry Coburn, 2006

All Rights Reserved

Abstract

Walking Home:

Women's Transformative Experiences in the Wilderness of the Appalachian Trail

by

Merry J. Coburn

This qualitative study explored the nature of psychospiritual transformation experienced by 12 mid-life women who walked over 2,000 miles on the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). Transformation was defined as a significant change in a person's functioning characterized as expanded self-understanding, a connection with Spirit, and a commitment to service. All but one participant walked the length of the trail during a 12-month period of time, and all identified themselves as deeply changed. The study incorporated two transpersonal research approaches: Organic Inquiry and Intuitive Inquiry. Evidence included the participants' embodied writing related to the wilderness of the A.T., spoken stories about their transformative experience, and created or chosen visual images of transformation. Their experiences matched Clements' (2000) description of transformation. Wilderness themes that emerged from the women's writing included encountering the embodied feminine, dissolving boundaries between the self and the wild, experiencing acceptance, being in relationship, everything as it should be, connected, challenging, trustworthy, sensual, vast, timeless, ever changing. Transformative themes that emerged and were portrayed through stories included a deep connection within the self, with others, and with the environment; feeling competent; trusting; a sense of presence; becoming an authentic self; desiring to be of service; experiencing a sense of wonder; and creativity. Stages in their transformation experience

recalled the tale of descent and rebirth disclosed in the Sumerian myth of Innana. The women's experiences included beginning in darkness, arriving at the crossroads, the descent, experiencing compassion, retrieving the embodied self, experiencing rebirth, and coming home. The collective evidence strongly suggested the emergence of a more integrated and expansive level of psychospiritual development, accompanied by evidence of service and creative expression, following an extended encounter with wilderness. The study may have important implications for the field of women's studies, transpersonal psychology, and ecopsychology.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the inspiration, cooperation, trust, and caring received while conducting this study. No one does this kind of work alone. First and foremost I wish to acknowledge my profound gratitude for the presence of Spirit in my life. It has been a continuing source of guidance, my connection to wilderness, and a necessary kindling for the creative fires. Sincere thanks and endless admiration go to the courageous women whose stories form the basis for this study. Without their willingness to share experiences of transformation with a total stranger, this work would have been impossible.

Deep appreciation goes to my committee chairperson, Dr. Irene Lazarus for her masterful direction of the project and for her guidance in the area of women's psychospiritual development. Committee members, Drs. Nancy Rowe and Dominic Cappadonna contributed their wisdom, their profound understanding of wilderness, and their enthusiastic support for this investigation. I am grateful to both Dr. William Braud and Dr. Rosemarie Anderson for their masterful teaching of transpersonal research skills. Dr. Darcy Horton provided fine editorial assistance and heartfelt encouragement during difficult times. Dr. Charles Fisher helped refine my interview questions, allowing the hikers' stories to unfold naturally. The Appalachian Trail Conference provided invaluable assistance in locating thru-hikers who might participate in the study.

My path to a deep encounter with wilderness spans many years. Inspiring teachers, friends, and mentors provided a light along the way. I am grateful to my parents who were my first teachers, inspiring an early love and respect for wilderness. Sincere appreciation is offered to my mentor and friend, Karen Mackie who introduced me to a woman's way of knowing during the early years of graduate work. Dr. Rex Olson

became an invaluable sounding board for my ideas throughout the process and a faithful guide in exploring the mysteries of the soul.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to the people who helped care for my physical, emotional, and spiritual well being during a long journey. John Coburn nurtured and fed me and helped me solve endless computer problems. Cynthia Henby kept me grounded through my yoga practice. Sparrow Hart taught me to listen more deeply to the voice of wilderness. This endeavor owes its existence to the love, guidance, and support of these individuals and to many others who believed in the project and in me.

Epigram

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver, 1986 from *Dream Work*

Prologue

Transformation has been a gradual unfolding for me, and wilderness has been a container for that experience. Over the years I instinctively yearned for wilderness whenever I felt lost or broken. Wild places have the power to sooth and heal me. Yet I still feel fear in the darkness, a place beyond my control. I will always be small in the forest or on the top of a mountain. Wild places inspire my wonder and respect. They have fostered a shift in my consciousness, calling me back to myself. Wilderness has been the catalyst and the container for my transformation.

A wilderness experience begins for me with a deep sense of re-connection. My body resonates with the place. Being in wilderness is an invitation to open and receive. My breathing grows full as I walk deeper into its mystery. I sigh and stretch under the canopy of trees. My skin relaxes and my palms open. My hands turn outward as if connecting with the energy of the place. Closing my eyes I feel the tree roots sinking deep into the humus packed soil as I sink into a deeper, more expansive realm of knowing. My conscious, planning mind relaxes, and an invisible barrier begins to dissolve. This memory of wilderness is deep and organic. Life has often disclosed itself in surprising ways there.

Perception tells as much about the perceiver as the object of perception (Nhat Hanh, 2004). Just as the mirror throws images back and forth endlessly, no one can say where it all began. Who is looking? Who is seen? Closing my eyes I see myself standing alone in the depths of the redwood forest on a hill over Monterey Bay. I smell the loam and fungus in the shadows of the great overarching trees. This pungent aroma, so rich

with possibility is a reminder of my own fertile, female body. The forest and I are lovers. We are one being, defined as two by virtue of a thin membrane of skin that separates us. The forest's silence envelops me, providing metaphors for my life.

Experiences of wilderness appear often in my dreams. They work their way into the deepest parts of me, returning me to my essential self. Countless wilderness adventures have been part of my waking life. A disappearing path through the forest is an irresistible call to follow. These wilderness encounters have elicited a continual unfolding for me. The story that follows portrays one real life journey, exemplifying the transformative shift in awareness that wilderness may foster. It took place on the Appalachian Trail in 2004.

It had been unusually hot and humid that July. The sun beat down from an almost cloudless sky. Perspiration dripped off my chin as I climbed a steep, grassy section of the trail. Small clouds of black flies and gnats rose with each footfall, chewing at my arms and legs. I had planned this hike to renew my spirit. Instead I was totally focused on the pesky bugs and the damage rocks and roots were doing to my feet.

Lying sleepless in the tent at nightfall, I heard myself whimpering quietly in response to the throbbing pain in my feet and my itchy bites. Were my wilderness wandering days numbered? Maybe the magic was gone. Instead of inspiration, there had been the punishment of roots and rocks, the whirl of insects, and the sameness of unrelenting green. For hours I drifted between wakefulness and sleep.

It was too warm for a sleeping bag, and no breeze stirred as the hours dragged by. I felt vulnerable. Something was moving silently outside the tent. Later an owl's distant cry startled me from my half-sleep. I heard the wild yipping of coyotes, followed by a

single, unearthly howl. Something deep and wild was stirring inside me, and I felt the edge of fear. Animals were hunting for food in the darkness. Life and death met regularly while I slept, but I was oblivious to the drama. The invisible ordering of the universe was proceeding without me and would continue long after I was gone.

The following morning I rose, packed my gear, and started down the trail again. I hiked for hours, absent-mindedly gazing at my feet. The green same-ness of the forest was suddenly interrupted by an expanse of gray stone scattered everywhere on both sides of the trail. Thousands of pounds of rock had apparently been carried from various places on the mountain to create a sculpture garden along the trail. I questioned the reality of my perception. There were arched engineering marvels, a Star of David, and art works of all kinds. There were even piles of rock yet to be formed. How much fun it would be to stop for a while, but I was too tired to play.

Though I wanted to keep going, exhaustion triumphed. Collapsing on a large rock, I began to muse. Why do I keep missing the playfulness in life? It really hasn't been much fun. I'm always too rushed to stop for a dip in the lake or to build castles on the mountain. My goals are always getting in the way. It felt as if some unseen presence was keeping a scorecard on my accomplishments. While it would have been inviting to stay in this spot for the night, stopping wasn't part of my plan. I pushed the thought aside and continued grudgingly down the trail toward the lean-to.

The next day dawned clear and cool. A furious storm had moved in during the night and scattered the clouds. Under the clearing sky, views from the top of the mountain promised to be spectacular. The Green Mountains and the High Peaks of the Adirondacks beckoned me onward. My pack was light, and the pain in my feet was

easing. The trail meandered gently through the forest and then crossed a small stream. Despite my new sense of ease, I barely escaped falling in the water. This slip felt like a call to attention.

A half hour later a large pink and gray rock stood in the middle of the path. I found the rock inexplicably riveting, as if it were the physical embodiment of unimaginable time. In retrospect its appearance seemed to represent a fault line in my experience. The thing-like quality of nature inexplicably opened into another dimension. The rock's lined surface carried me back through time. The world became a place of awe and wonder. I stood transfixed, and I pondered this change in reality before continuing down the trail.

Several hours passed, and the trail began a steeper climb. Soon I could hear my own breathing. All mental chatter ceased as my body became the focus of awareness. The ground beneath my feet gradually merged with a layer of clouds where the air was moist and soft. As I glanced up, I saw that every tree was coated with a uniform layer of ethereal moss. The mysterious gray coating softened the edges of everything. Moss trailed from every branch and hugged the trunks of every tree.

The path began to narrow before rising steeply over a bed of unrelenting rock. Large, jagged, black boulders filled the ravine. I climbed hand over foot, and I wondered about the wisdom of continuing up the mountain. Stunted, prickly evergreens created an impenetrable wall on both sides of the trail. It seemed less than two feet wide. Once the jagged rocks appeared, I began to imagine myself falling. The thought of tender, exposed skin and fragile bones paralyzed my thinking. This body seemed small and vulnerable on

the top of the mountain. Pushing aside my fears, I climbed toward the mountain's rocky cap.

Getting to the top has always been important to me. I had prided myself on finishing things no matter how difficult. In my life there was seldom room for joy or play. Just like this climb, I often was consumed by doubt whenever the top was approaching. My goals were so important that I often missed the beauty of the experience.

At last I stepped onto the open summit. At a distance small trees promised some shelter from the wind. It was easy to get lost in the beauty. Beyond my notice the weather was rapidly changing. A bank of forbidding storm clouds and cold rain had replaced the formerly abundant sunshine. I hurriedly retraced my steps until I stood again on the exposed rocks of the bare summit. Powerful winds buffeted my body on all sides. The mountain felt dangerous now that the weather had changed.

Wet rocks are slippery. I desperately wanted to get down before the sky opened to release torrential rain. My measured walk turned to a run, and I leaped from rock to rock in hopes of finding shelter from the wind and rain. For a short while it seemed as if I was flying. Then in one very long moment, both of my feet left the ground. I watched myself falling in slow motion toward the jagged rocks. Time stood still, and there was a sense of being utterly disconnected. During those moments I considered the damage the unyielding rock surface would do to my bare legs and fragile wrists. The force of my body brought me down hard.

The mental dialogue ceased as soon as my body slammed into the rocks. Dark red blood oozed from the split in the surface of my right leg. The calf turned instantly purple from knee to ankle. I saw myself lying on the rocks, looking up at the sky. Who's going

to fix this? How am I going to get down the mountain if my legs or wrists are broken? To my surprise I had a fleeting recollection of childbirth, a moment when I recognized that I would have to give birth to my child.

Lying there in the cold rain, I glanced upward at clouds rushing across the sky. I was conscious of their power and my place in the grand scheme of the universe. Slowly my fear dissolved, and a sense of peacefulness took its place. The rocks supported me. I experienced a sense of gratitude and wonder for the embrace of the earth and the sky. Wiping the blood from my leg, I slowly struggled to my feet and headed carefully back down the mountain. Something inside me had shifted.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Epigram.....	vii
Prologue	viii
List of Figures	xxi
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Researcher's Origins of the Study	1
Rationale	2
Study Overview	4
Research Questions.....	5
Summary of Methods.....	7
Significance of the Study	8
General Public Significance.....	8
Ecopsychology Significance.....	10
Transpersonal Psychology Significance	10
Significance for Women	11
Researcher's Personal Significance	12
Summary of Significance.....	13
Definition of Terms	13
Summary of Remaining Chapters.....	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	18
Psychospiritual Transformation	18

Characteristics of Psychospiritual Transformation	18
Psychospiritual Developmental Models	22
Wounds as Openings.....	27
The Appalachian Trail and Its Hikers.....	28
Wilderness as a Catalyst for Psychospiritual Transformation.....	30
Creates Shifts in Awareness.....	30
Evokes a Powerful Experience of Connectedness	30
Reflects the Inner Landscape	32
Promotes Self-Actualization	32
Facilitates Peak Experiences.....	32
Provides the Setting for Rites of Passage	33
Creates Openings for Individuals with Wounds	34
Positively Affects Personal and Social Attitudes and Values.....	34
Results in Profound and Permanent Personal Changes	35
May Be Necessary for Mental Health.....	35
Provides Openings for Inner Awareness and Shifts in Consciousness.....	36
Brings the Embodied Self into Awareness and Mirrors It.....	36
A.T. Hikers' Journals.....	38
Stories, Metaphors, and Myths and Psychospiritual Transformation.....	40
Stories	41
Metaphors	41
Myths	42
Summary: Creating the Preliminary Lenses	43

Chapter 3: Research Methods	44
Researcher's Comments	44
Organic Inquiry	45
Storytelling.....	45
Non-Rational Approaches to Knowing.....	46
Intuitive Inquiry	46
Cycles of Interpretation.....	47
Validity	49
Sympathetic Resonance	50
Researcher's Personal Experience	51
Embodied Writing.....	51
Pilot Study.....	52
Participants.....	53
Selection Criteria	53
Recruitment.....	55
Selection.....	56
Procedures.....	56
Incorporating Intuition	57
Mailing the Information Packet	57
Collecting the Embodied Writing Exercise	58
Conducting the Meditative Nature Walk and Individual Storytelling Session	58
Collecting the Artifacts and Creative Work.....	60
Creating the Preliminary Version of the Group Story	60

Conducting the Group Storytelling Session.....	60
Identifying Metaphors and Refining Group Story	61
Instruments.....	61
Demographic Questionnaire	61
Embodied Writing Instructions.....	61
Meditative Nature Walk.....	62
Individual Storytelling Session	62
Group Storytelling Session	63
Treatment of Data	63
Incubating the Data	63
Validating the Data	64
Presenting the Data	64
Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 1: Clarifying the Research Topic	65
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study.....	65
Chapter 4: Results.....	68
Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 2: Identifying Preliminary Lenses.....	68
Intuitive Inquiry, Cycle 3: Collecting Original Data and Preparing Reports	69
Participant #1: Midnight	70
Participant #2: Heidi	74
Participant #3: Sirocco	81
Participant #4: CicelyB	88
Participant #5: Sisu	94
Participant #6: Jamie.....	101

Participant #7: Cadence	106
Participant #8: Nuppi	113
Participant #9: Groovy	119
Participant #10: Buzz	128
Participant #11: GottaHike!	139
Participant #12: Bernadette	146
Summarizing the Themes	153
Data Analysis	155
Study Questions	155
Analyzing the Stories	155
Verifying Transformational Themes	158
Analyzing Embodied Writing	158
Creating the Group Story	162
Group Story: The A.T. Experience as a Tale of Descent and Rebirth	164
Transformational Impact of the Research	175
Impact on the Participants	176
Impact on the Researcher	176
Impact on the Audiocassette Transcriber	177
Impact on the Resonance Panel	177
Summary of Respondents' Remarks	178
Impact on the Reader	178
Chapter 5: Research Journal	181
Introduction	181

Fall, 2003	181
Summer, 2004.....	182
Spring, 2005	182
Summer, 2005	193
Commentary.....	200
Chapter 6. Discussion	202
Chapter Overview	202
Review of the Methods.....	202
Organic Inquiry: Storytelling as Transformation.....	203
Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 4: Transforming and Refining the Lenses.....	205
Integrating Cycle 2 Lenses with Data Collected in Cycle 3	206
Assessing the Power of Cycle 2 Lenses.....	211
Exceptions.....	211
New Emerging Lenses	212
Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 5: Integrating Findings and Literature Review	212
Integrating Cycle 4 Lenses with the Literature Review.....	213
Presenting Final Lenses	223
Creativity and Transformation.....	225
Suggestions for Further Research	226
Study Implications	228
Implications for Women	228
Implications for Transpersonal Psychology.....	230
Personal Implications.....	233

Implications for Wilderness	235
The Significance of Place	237
References.....	239
Appendix A: Letter of Invitation	247
Appendix B: Letter of Gratitude	249
Appendix C: Consent Form	250
Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire.....	254
Appendix E: Interview protocol.....	256
Appendix F: Embodied writing instructions.....	259
Appendix G: Recruitment Advertisement	261
Appendix H: Transcriber's Confidentiality Statement	262
Appendix I: Creative Expression and Trail Artifacts	263
Midnight.....	263
Nuppi	264
Buzz	265
Groovy	265
Sirocco	267
GottaHike!	270
Trail Artifacts.....	271
Nuppi.....	271
Jamie	273

List of Figures

1.	Midnight's transformation image.....	70
2.	Heidi's transformation image.....	75
3.	CicelyB's transformation image.....	89
4.	Sisu's transformation image.....	95
5.	Jamie's transformation image.....	101
6.	Nuppi's transformation image.....	114
7.	Groovy's transformation image.....	120
8.	Buzz's transformation image.....	128
9.	GottaHike!'s transformation image.....	140
10.	Bernadette's transformation image.....	146
11.	Nuppi's photograph of a water garden she designed and construct.....	263
12.	Cadence's A.T. photos.....	265
13.	Cadence's A.T. photo.....	266
14.	Bernadette's blue ceramic tile.....	256
15.	Sisu's new hiking stick.....	272
16.	Sisu's gift of gratitude from a 12-year old thru-hiker.....	273

Chapter 1. Introduction

This dissertation explored the experiences of psychospiritual transformation in 12 female long distance wilderness hikers who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail. A *thru-hiker* is someone who has hiked the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) end-to-end, a distance of over 2,000 miles from Georgia to Maine, in a single, continuous journey. It was a qualitative study informed by organic and intuitive approaches. Study participants were women who self-identified as having experienced psychospiritual transformation as a result of their thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail.

Researcher's Origins of the Study

The impetus for the study was the spiritually sustaining and transforming influence that walking in wilderness had on my life. This research topic was not so much chosen as gifted by Spirit and remained essentially unchanged since the day I received it. An inner voice spoke in my ear with an authority that was undeniable. It was a call to my life's work.

Wilderness has been an integral part of my life. My childhood years were spent in the rural countryside where I learned the cycles and secrets of nature from my parents--walking in the forested hills, gardening, and picking wild berries. Nature was a consistent emotional anchor for my life and a constant solace in times of trouble. Going for a walk was my response to feeling lost or disconnected.

My connection with wilderness continued to grow through the mid-life years. I began taking backpacking trips. My needs were small in the wilderness. I could live simply with few material possessions. The power of spending extended time in wilderness altered the way I viewed the world and myself. I felt whole and peaceful there

and often found it jarring to return home. These excursions became more frequent and even more significant as the years passed. I began considering a thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail around my 50th birthday. I eagerly sought out published hiker manuscripts (Brill, 1990; Ross, 1982; Winters, 2001) and listened to Appalachian Trail hikers' stories as a way to live the experience vicariously. I wanted to cross the boundary into wilderness. The fantasy became real as I engaged in this research. .

The stories that appear in this study reveal the essence of transformative experiences that took place in nature. As a co-participant in this work, it is important that I reveal my personal paradigm of nature. I understand it to be the world we have not made. When we open to its wildness and its freedom, we find our right sense of place, a small piece in a greater whole. We are offered an opportunity to feel a profound sense of belonging, an infinite richness of incomparable beauty, and a renewal of trust. Waking up to such a world, we discover a self that is vibrantly alive and that exists outside the boundaries of our head. In wilderness we find our true home.

Rationale

This study explored the psychospiritual transformational experiences of 12 female thru-hikers on the A.T. It is important for several reasons.

First, it has the potential for increasing our understanding of the connection between nature-based experiences and psychospiritual changes. Several researchers have previously explored this topic. Specifically, Maslow (1999) found that nature was the setting for the experience of ecstatic moments or *peak experiences*. Dufrechou (2004) asserted that the potential for psychospiritual transformation is great when nature-based experiences are integrated. Dowdall's (1998) research on ecological attitudes, spirituality,

and exceptional human experience (EHE) led her to conclude that nature is probably a direct conduit to spiritual growth. Her research showed a corresponding growth in both spirituality and earth-friendly values for her study's participants. It remains unclear how much time must be spent in nature for such profound changes to take place. Finally, Stankey & Schreyer (1987) posited that the interaction of cognitive and affective realms that is facilitated by wilderness often leads to transcendent experiences. A deep interaction between self and other, the subjective and the objective, takes place in this realm. As a result, individuals experience a greater sense of inner unity and identify with something beyond themselves.

Second, walking and wilderness have long histories as paths to enlightenment and have much to recommend them. Jesus is said to have wandered for 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. Muhammad traveled to the solitary retreat of a cave for contemplation. Gautama Buddha left home and spent 49 days seated beneath the bodhi tree before experiencing enlightenment (Drury, 1999). During the Middle Ages, pilgrims embarked on walking journeys to holy places for inner healing and forgiveness (Cliff & Cliff, 1970). American Transcendentalists, including Emerson and Thoreau, linked their experiences with nature to revelations of the Divine (Brulatour, 1999). The Aborigines and other traditional peoples continue to incorporate walking in wilderness as a regular part of their spiritual lives. Nature has long been considered the symbol of spirit, and meditative walking has been a medium for spiritual growth in many cultures (Cliff & Cliff, 1970). Walking is used as a form of meditation because of its power to produce a shift in consciousness (Kornfield, 1993).

Third, embodied or feminine ways of knowing have the potential for helping to heal the cultural split between mind and body, humankind and nature. By recording experiences from the inside out and sharing them in a respectful and deep way, this research transformed the participants and the researcher. In addition, it has the potential to transform the reader and our relationship with the earth itself.

Finally, this research study was a way of marking my own journey on the path of transformation, a path of listening to and telling stories. Wilber (1999) asserted that transformative growth requires a commitment to engage in some form of spiritual practice. During the course of this study, my practice was this work. It was both the path and the fruit. It is my hope that the reader will choose to engage with these stories. Clements (2003) wrote, “To truly experience another’s story requires the willingness to be altered by it” (p. 22). The women in this study walked. Their stories represent the embodied journey. Each woman stepped away from her ordinary life and crossed an invisible boundary into the solitude of wilderness, facing both her fears and her dreams. It was a life changing experience.

Study Overview

This study discloses experiences of psychospiritual transformation that are revealed in the lives of 12 women who thru-hiked the A.T. It honors non-rational ways of knowing. Stories of transformation are presented in this study in the women’s own words. Participants were asked to articulate their experiences in several ways including through the use of embodied writing (Anderson, 2002), storytelling, and an art-based activity that was initiated using archetypal images. In some cases, artifacts participants considered illustrative of their transformative experience are included in the research

findings. In response to the women's stories, a group story of transformation was composed that highlighted transformative themes. These themes were compared to the existing research literature and my own transformative experience.

Research Questions

The primary question addressed was: What is the nature of the experience of psychospiritual transformation that occurs in women spending an extended period of time walking in wilderness? Secondary questions included (a) How does this experience vary from person to person? (b) Are there aspects of transformation that unfold in the same way for everyone? and (c) What outward signs of change are evidenced in a person's creative work following a transformative experience in wilderness?

Experiences of psychospiritual transformation have several identifying characteristics. Transformation has been described as a significant change in a person's functioning. It "is the process by which we become more uniquely who we are, and through which we recognize how much we have in common with the universe and even recognize that, in a sense, we are the universe" (Hart, 2000, p. 157). Clements (2000) characterized the components of transformative change as self-understanding, connecting with spirit, and evidencing a commitment to service. Braud, Dufrechou, Raynolds, and Schroeter (2000) noted that transformative change is marked by the qualities of persistence, pervasiveness, and profundity. Thus, transformation should have a marked impact on the person experiencing it.

Three models of psychospiritual development were helpful in identifying stages of psychospiritual transformation. The models referenced in this study were Washburn's (2003), Ruumet's (1997), and Anderson's (2004b). Each provided a clear set of

embodied markers for development as it progressed from personal to transpersonal levels. Washburn's (2003) model describes a spiritual decision-making point called *the crossroads* where there is the potential for a shift to a more expansive self. Ruumet's (1997) model provides clear embodied markers for seven stages of development. Her model is premised on the unity and interdependence of the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of existence. Anderson's (2004b) *Body Map* traces development through eight distinct stages of life experience and poses a central question that becomes the core of experience at each stage. She described characteristics of each stage of psychospiritual development that included the nature of relationships, values, and orientation to the world. These models were helpful in highlighting transitions from personal to transpersonal levels of development.

Both Organic Inquiry and Intuitive Inquiry methods, approaches that honor non-rational ways of knowing, informed my research inquiry. Selections from participants' narratives were used to illuminate the transformational nature of walking in wilderness. Evidence was drawn from individual story telling sessions (i.e., interviews) related to the experience of transformation as well as from selections of embodied writing and other relevant material, including photos and trail logs. A resonance panel of women hikers was recruited to establish the validity of material. The interviews were analyzed using a set of lenses developed from textual material following five hermeneutic cycles of Intuitive Inquiry. A group story of transformation appears in the Results chapter, and its validity was confirmed with the participants. Finally, reproductions of original creative works of the participants appear in this dissertation where appropriate.

Summary of Methods

My goal for this research was to explore two kinds of questions. My primary question, understanding the experience of wilderness transformation, was best addressed using the Organic Inquiry method (Clements, 2004). Braud (1998, 2004) described it as an idiographic approach appropriate for exploring the nature of experiences. Subordinate questions were situated within the realm of conceptualization, for which Braud (1998) recommended a hermeneutic approach. Thus, I selected the Intuitive Inquiry method described by Anderson (2003) to help address those questions.

According to Clements (2004), Organic Inquiry is a qualitative approach especially suited to topics related to psychospiritual growth. Organic Inquiry has the potential for cultivating changes of mind and heart in the researcher, the participants, and the readers. The researcher becomes the subjective instrument in the research, incorporating liminal and spiritual influences along with the experiences of the study's participants. Preparation, inspiration, and integration are used in both the data gathering and data analysis processes. The use of stories as findings engages both thinking and feeling modalities.

Intuitive Inquiry (Anderson, 2003) is also a qualitative approach. The hermeneutic circle of Intuitive Inquiry is comprised of 5 Cycles or steps. Intuition is cultivated as a way of knowing in every cycle. In Cycle 1, intuition helps to clarify the research topic. It appears at the end of the Research Methods chapter and includes a full description of the research topic. In Cycle 2, the researcher engages in a sustained interaction with a chosen text or image. Following this interaction, the researcher's initial understandings of the topic are disclosed. Cycle 2 appears in the Results chapter. In Cycle 3, the data are

collected, and summary reviews are prepared. Cycle 3 also appears in the Results chapter. In Cycle 4, original lenses are refined and modified using the research data, and a new set of lenses emerge. Cycle 4 appears in the Discussion chapter. In Cycle 5, the last joining takes place. It consists of integrating the Cycle 4 emerging lenses with the literature review, and it results in the final Cycle 5 lenses. Cycle 5 also appears in the Discussion chapter.

Significance of the Study

This study has important implications for the general public and for scholars in the fields of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. It also has personal significance for me.

General Public Significance

Contemporary philosophers have written about the dualistic split between spirit and matter that developed in Western culture. It began with Aristotle and was further developed in the writings of Descartes (Burt, 1932; Husserl, 1970; Zimmerman, 1993). This split placed nature and humankind in opposition to each other. Nature was thought to exist solely for the purpose of satisfying human desires and needs. Human thinking became the privileged choice over input from the body and the emotions. Metzner (1995) suggested that many of our cultural practices today stand in direct opposition to the world of nature that includes wilderness, emotions, and the embodied self. Both the environment and our sense of well-being have suffered, as knowing has become disconnected from feeling. Hillman and Ventura (1992) noted that the culture as a whole seems to be experiencing a deep sense of dis-ease and discontent that calls out for healing. According to Metzner (1995), the “inability to stop our suicidal and ecocidal

behavior fits the clinical definition of addiction or compulsion” (p. 60). By increasing knowledge about the interdependence of people and nature, both may benefit.

Deep ecologists believe that a genuine concern for the earth is a product of individual spiritual development or self-realization (Devall & Sessions, 1993). Thus the future of the earth and the psychospiritual development of humankind are linked together. Research (Dowdall, 1998; Riordan, 2002) has demonstrated that ecological attitudes and behaviors are associated with transformative change in individuals. Spiritual development in the Western world has been typically focused at the level of the ego (Washburn, 2003).

Glendinning (1994) asserted that there are signs of a pervasive narcissism influencing the choices people make. The addictive quality of modern life is characterized by a driving need to have more (Glendinning, 1994; Metzner, 1995), and the focus of contemporary culture seems to be increasingly on consumerism (Durning, 1995). The desire for consumer goods is threatening to gobble up the earth’s remaining resources. Without a larger view of ourselves, our current choices will likely be devastating for the future of humanity and the planet (Ruumet, 1997). "To a considerable degree the evolution of society or humanity is anchored in and depends upon the evolution of individuals" (Metzner, 1980, p. 47).

Westerners may be ready to experience a shift in their psychospiritual development. This study sought to expand an understanding of how deep experiences in wilderness can lead to transformative psychospiritual change. It is hoped that spiritual directors, counselors, and ecotherapists will find this study helpful for promoting spiritual growth and inner healing. As a result, the earth will also benefit.

Ecopsychology Significance

An important purpose of this study was to illuminate the connection between people and wilderness. Many ecologists believe that scientific and technical knowledge is outstripping the ability to make wise decisions about how we relate to the environment. There is mounting political pressure to open existing wilderness areas to economic development. Ever increasing demands are being made on wild areas for consumption of their natural resources and for recreational development. Deep ecologists argue that legislation will be unsuccessful in protecting wilderness areas from exploitation (Fox, 1990). A new approach is needed to heal the human and nature split. Through the recognition of our deep connection, beliefs and behaviors naturally become more ecologically sensitive.

It can be argued that the continued existence of wilderness is linked to a human capacity to grow spiritually and heal emotionally. "Broadening and deepening our identification--or our sense of felt commonality--with the world around us leads us from a relatively narrow, atomistic, isolated, or particle-like sense of self to a wide, expansive, participatory, or field-like one" (Fox, 1993, p. 241). As we identify with the earth, we naturally begin to care for it.

Transpersonal Psychology Significance

This inquiry furthered an understanding of the role of body, mind, and spirit in the process of psychospiritual transformation. Previous studies addressed the connection between transformation and wilderness (Burke, 1983; Clements, 1992; Dowdall, 1998; Dufrechou, 2003; Kuhn, 2001; Riordan, 2000; Zequeira-Russell, 2002). The physical demands of distance hiking made this inquiry unique. There is a deep connection between

the natural world and the embodied self when walking in wilderness. The repetitive nature and open focus of long distance walking have similarities to the experience of walking meditation and seem to create a shift in consciousness. The sense qualities of wilderness also activate a sense of self-awareness, an awakened presence, and a renewed connection with the earth and with the embodied self (Abram, 1996).

This study's design also makes a contribution to the field of transpersonal psychology. It used the emerging research approaches of Organic Inquiry and Intuitive Inquiry. While my intention was to add to the fund of knowledge about transformative processes, there is evidence that the study also promoted an experience of spiritual transformation in its participants and may have the same effect on its readers. Stories have the power to transform lives, especially when the story is shared in a deep and meaningful way (Clements, 1994-95). They have the power to bring mind, heart, and soul together in a unified way of knowing. This study's narrative approach was designed to encourage the participants and the readers to engage in the collective experience of storytelling. The invitation to tell one's story had the power to allow the female participants to integrate their experience and facilitate further transformation. By finding and illuminating the underlying truth in their stories, the participants experienced the enactment of a myth, and their hiking experiences disclosed another realm of meaning.

Significance for Women

All the participants in this study were women. Only about one-quarter of A.T. thru-hikers are female, and their appearance on the trail has been relatively recent (Appalachian Trail Conference, 2004). The presence of a solitary female in a wilderness area can still raise eyebrows. There is the sense that women stand an increased risk of

being the targets of violence. Solitary wilderness adventures have been uncommon choices for mid-life women. The women hikers in this study often postponed their dreams for many years to attend to relationships or children. Heilbrun (1988) noted the absence of alternative narratives for women's lives.

The choices and pain of the women who did not make a man the center of their lives seemed unique, because there were no models of the lives they wanted to live, no exemplars, no stories. (p. 31)

While women have made strides in expanding their options, there remains an underlying tendency to sacrifice personal needs for the sake of maintaining relationships. This study aims to offer alternative narratives.

Ruomet (1997) asserted that this is a time when “neglected feminine elements are being restored to our human wholeness, in both women and men.” (p. 6). She stated the need for rebalancing masculine and feminine elements in the culture. Masculine elements have predominated in Western culture. Thought has been privileged over feeling, mind privileged over body, and humankind privileged over nature. Honoring women's experience and the knowledge of intuition, emotion, and the body has been an effort to help redress this imbalance in a small way.

It is my hope that both women and men will recognize a lost part of themselves in these stories and experience through them a greater sense of wholeness.

Researcher's Personal Significance

Walking in wilderness has been central to my transformation. I want to give back something for all that has been given to me. A sense of profound gratitude fuels my desire to help others appreciate its power to heal. Someday walking a wilderness trail like the A.T. may become an accepted approach to psychospiritual transformation. As others

experience the transforming qualities of wilderness, I believe they will feel love for it and work to protect it.

Summary of Significance

In summary, the capacity for people to experience profound change as a result of walking in wilderness has important implications for the general public as well as for the fields of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. The fate of humankind and the earth are deeply intertwined (Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Macy, 1991; Naess, 1987). As long as there is wilderness for solitude and reflection, those who walk there can experience transformation and healing. A transformed self encompasses the world. Ecological values and actions grow naturally from this profound connection (Dowdall, 1998; Kuhn, 2001; Riordan, 2002).

Definition of Terms

Appalachian Trail: The locus of the study is the Appalachian Trail, located in the mountainous areas of the Eastern United States. It is over 2,000 miles in length and runs from Georgia to Maine. Hikers commonly refer to it as the A.T.

Intuition: It is knowing that is immediate apprehension; a non-rational, global synthesis of multiple sources of information, including input from all the senses and the body as a whole. Anderson provided a typology of intuition that includes the following: (a) unconscious and symbolic processes, including dream images and creative expression; (b) psychic or parapsychological experiences that may include the researcher's heartfelt connection to a topic; (c) sensory modes including less well known senses such as proprioception (inner body senses); (d) empathic identification or

compassionate knowing; and (e) through our wounds which are openings to the world (Anderson, 2003)

Psychospiritual Experience and Changes: Imber (1994) described the psychospiritual realm as “an inward symbolic self that strives for significance, yearns for meaning, and longs for purpose. The psychospiritual self is the innermost self--transcending ego structures or cultural conditioning” (p. 20). For the purposes of this study, experiences in the psychospiritual realm were defined as those that impacted the deep self and that lead to an experience of greater authenticity and meaning in life for the participants. Psychospiritual changes were recognized by changes in attitude, values, vocation, and/or lifestyle that occurred in response to an inner change of heart.

Washburn (2003) differentiated the stages of psychospiritual development with the words *egoic* and *transegoic*. The personal developmental stages are referred to as egoic. Developmental stages beyond the personal or egoic are transegoic and include the transpersonal substages of awakening, regression in service of transcendence, regeneration in Spirit, and integration (Washburn, 2003). This study makes reference to Washburn’s egoic and transegoic distinctions.

Synchronicity: White (1998) defined synchronicity as “a subjectively significant coincidence between an inner state...and an unaccountable outer event that corresponds to or answers the need” (p. 143). References to “trail magic” in this study seem to mirror this definition.

Thru-Hiker: The participants in the study were individuals who identified themselves as *thru-hikers* on the A.T. A thru-hike is defined as “an uninterrupted journey of the trail completed within one year” (Mueser, 1998, p. 2). Two women in the study

were forced to interrupt their hike as a result of unexpected circumstances. Their hikes took a little longer than a year to complete. All the others hiked straight through.

Transformation: The process of transformation implies a qualitative change in a person's way of being. Clements (2000) identified transformation as a change that impacts the central part of the self and encompasses changes of mind and heart as a result of inspiration by the unconscious or Spirit. "The merging of liminal experience and intellect results in a restructuring of the ego called transformative change, opening it inwardly toward self-realization and increased connection with Spirit as well as outwardly towards connection with humanity" (Clements, 2000, p. 25). In this study, transformative experiences referred to events and/or times (either sudden or gradual) when an individual felt a connection to something beyond the everyday self and when that experience changed her in some fundamentally important way(s) that were lasting and profound.

Wilderness: Wilderness has been described as a large area of wild land with original vegetation and wildlife. It is undeveloped and without permanent improvements or human habitation (Snyder, 1990). Benton McKay, A.T.'s founder, proposed the creation of a wilderness trail that would be a refuge from metropolitan life and an escape from the "humdrum of the regulation world" (Mueser, 1998, p. 2). In 1964, the Federal Wilderness Act was passed into law to protect wilderness areas and to ensure that the imprint of man's work would become unnoticeable (Gorte, 1964). An area designated as wilderness has been described as a natural area in which human beings are visitors and "the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man" (Adirondack Mountain Club, 1980, p. 13). Wilderness was defined in this study as a protected area in which the

impact of humans was negligible and native animals and plants flourished in an uninhibited way.

The root of the word wilderness is *wild*. It often has negative connotations in contemporary culture. For the purposes of this study, some positive qualities associated with wild-ness were emphasized: (a) animals--free agents living within natural systems; (b) plants--flourishing in accord with innate qualities; (c) land--pristine; (d) individuals--unintimidated, self-reliant, and independent; and (e) behavior--artless, free, and spontaneous (Snyder, 1990). These qualities suggest a sense of freedom, expansiveness, and connection. References to the wild in this study focused on its positive qualities as they applied both in the external world of nature and to internal qualities of the self.

Kaye (2000) identified 10 important qualities of wilderness that may be central to eliciting experiences of psychospiritual transformation. Wilderness provides a sense of temporal connectedness, both to the historical past and to future generations, through a commitment to its preservation. It allows people to encounter mystery and the unknown, for which there exists in us an intrinsic human longing. Wilderness offers a place of solitude conducive to reflection and human growth. As a symbol of freedom, both the land and its people can develop there in an unhindered and free way. Wilderness also engenders in us feelings of humility, making it possible to realize our place in the cosmos. Finally, experiencing is a reminder of the intrinsic value of the land, as well as of the intrinsic value of the self. Through experiences with wilderness, we recognize the need for restraint, in order that these ineffable qualities may continue to feed the human spirit.

Summary of Remaining Chapters

Subsequent chapters include a review of the literature, research methods, results, researcher journal, and discussion. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to psychospiritual transformation; wilderness as a catalyst for psychospiritual transformation; and myths, metaphors, and stories as they relate to psychospiritual transformation. Chapter 3 includes information about the Organic Inquiry and Intuitive Inquiry methods, validity, pilot study, participants, procedures, instruments, planned treatment of the data, and Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 1. Chapter 4 includes Intuitive Inquiry Cycles 2 and 3. It also relates the stories of psychospiritual transformation in the words of the participants, as well as including common themes and a group story of transformation. Some of the women's creative work is included with their stories. Additional creative work appears in Appendix I. Chapter 5 is my research journal, which allows the reader to experience the interviews as I did. Chapter 6 explores the methods used and then discusses the data and themes in terms of those methods. It includes Intuitive Inquiry Cycles 4 and 5. It also includes sections on suggestions for further research, study implications, and the significance of place.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study explored experiences of wilderness-based psychospiritual transformation in women who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail. The literature review creates a backdrop for the study by summarizing the most relevant theoretical and empirical work related to (a) psychospiritual transformation; (b) wilderness as a catalyst for psychospiritual transformation; and (c) stories, metaphors, and myths as they relate to psychospiritual transformation.

Psychospiritual Transformation

This section opens with characteristics of transformation. It provides a brief overview of three psychospiritual developmental models and describes wounds as openings.

Characteristics of Psychospiritual Transformation

There are a number of distinguishing features of psychospiritual transformation. They are described below.

Persistent, pervasive, and profound. Braud, Dufrechou, Raynolds, and Schroeter (2000) studied transformative experience in graduate students who participated in a multifaceted educational program in transpersonal psychology. They characterized transformative change as persistent, pervasive, and profound. The researchers also concluded that psychospiritual transformation is not a finalized event, but rather an ongoing one (Braud, Dufrechou, Raynolds, & Schroeter, 2000).

Impacts the core of the self. Metzner (1986) posited that transformation impacts the core of the self, dissolving barriers, so that the actual structures and functioning of the psyche are changed. He likened it to the effect that a fire has in transforming the

landscape. The forest's former character is barely recognizable, although it is the same place. Soon the land is bursting with new life, once the old forest has been destroyed (Metzner, 1986).

Creative, ongoing process that includes increased awareness. Hart (2001) described two important characteristics of transformation. The first important characteristic is a creative process that leads to the actualizing of a person's ever-expanding potential. The process of transformation is ongoing and without a limiting end point. The second important characteristic is awareness. It is as if we awaken to an expanded state that includes conscious willingness to engage in the transformation. As transformation begins to take place, energy is produced and ripples out to catalyze growth and expansion to the surroundings. There is also an ongoing cleansing or clearing of anything that might obscure the heart and mind. Hart summarized the engagement with transformative experience as an experiment with truth in which we must face freedom, fear, and responsibility (Hart, 2000). He further stated that, "The normal rhythm of human development, including spiritual development, involves regularly shedding our snakeskins of knowledge, attachments, and identity to make room for expansion into a larger perspective and identity" (Hart, 2000, p. 159).

Affects every facet of a person's life. Evidence of change should appear in a person's life after a transforming catalyst has been present. It is expected to be widespread, since transformative experience encompasses intellect, mind, and heart. Transformation shows itself as "an expanded inner understanding of self and Spirit, but also ...a greater desire to participate in the outer world... towards an expansion of self, Spirit, and service" (Clements, 2003, p. 23).

Changes the way life is experienced and understood. Gaynor (1999) used a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to study cognitive structures associated with experiences of psychospiritual transformation. Using Maslow's definitions of a self-actualizing person, her results demonstrated "significant and substantial evidence of a transition from non-self-actualizing towards self actualization" for individuals self-identifying as having had a transforming experience (Gaynor, 1999, p.188).

Transformation was associated with developmental changes in cognitive processes in individuals who had experienced transformation, including: (a) an expanded awareness of implicit relationships in aspects of the perceived universe; (b) expanded awareness of aspects of themselves; (c) awareness of new connections in various aspects of the universe; and (d) awareness of being part of a great universal order (Gaynor, 1999).

Can be sudden or gradual and elicit delight or fear. It is difficult to describe the upper realms of psychospiritual development, since they unfold in individualized ways. Metzner (1980) found that transformations of consciousness could be either sudden or gradual and elicit delight or fear.

Implies an expansion of the self into a broader realm of humanness. Until the 1960s, psychology considered the human personality complete when identity coalesced during late adolescence or early adulthood. Maslow's (1999) research called this into question as a result of his studies of highly functioning people. Yet most people seemed to stop developing along the way. He referred to the seemingly unassailable laws of contemporary psychology as "rules for living in a state of mild and chronic psychopathology and fearfulness, of stunting and crippling and immaturity which we

don't notice because most others have this same disease that we have" (Maslow, 1999, p. 72).

Maslow (1999) concluded that human beings have the potential to develop beyond what was formerly believed possible. *Self-actualization* represents a formerly unrecognized level of humanness. He defined it as follows:

. . . ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities and talents, as fulfillment of mission [of call, fate, destiny, or vocation], as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person's own intrinsic nature, as an increasing trend toward unity, integration or synergy within the person. (p. 31)

The motivation of self-actualized individuals is based less on the satisfaction of deficiency needs (safety, belonging and identification, close love relationships, respect and prestige) and increasingly on *Being motivation* or *B values* (Maslow, 1999). The B values include "wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth/honesty/reality, and self-sufficiency" (p. 83). Motives are less human and self-centered; instead, they focus increasingly on the *is-ness* or intrinsic nature of things, the potentialities of something or someone).

Can involve peak experiences. Maslow (1999) described a peak experience as (a) a feeling of being graced; (b) experience of awe, wonder, and reverence; (c) existence of poetic expression and communication; (d) a sense of unity, of being more fused with the world; (e) a disorientation in space and time; (f) a sense of completion; g) feelings of wonder, awe and reverence; and h) a sense of the good, desirable, and absolute.

Frequently occurring peak experiences are a concomitant of psychospiritual growth, and self-actualized persons report peak experiences more frequently than do others (Maslow, 1999).

Psychospiritual Developmental Models

Psychospiritual transformation, as described above, is a shift to a markedly different way of being. When in a person's life is this type of shift likely to occur? It is helpful to have markers for the various stages of psychospiritual development to act as aids in recognizing shifts and incidences of transformation.

Wilber (1999) described 5 categorical models used to conceptualize spiritual development. Most of these are stage theories. An exception is spiritual development that follows a peak experience. According to Wilber (1999), the bulk of research on psychospiritual development envisions higher stages of development incorporating earlier stages and prescribing that no stage may be skipped. These theories tended to make no provision for returning to an earlier stage of development from a later stage.

Staged-based theories and incidences of sudden transformation seem at odds with each other. Stage theories have failed to account for the incidence of heightened levels of spirituality that may appear in children or young people (Wilber, 1999). Wilber (1993) asserted that the undifferentiated spirituality of young children is not the same as the mature spirituality of the adult. Yet there are reports of transformative experiences by people in their teens or twenties during wilderness rituals or vision quests and other extended wilderness stays. The degree to which such experiences are integrated may depend on the individual's overall level of development across many possible developmental strands.

The work of Foster and Little (1989) highlighted a cultural embedded-ness in our current theories of spiritual development. Stage-based theories may fail to take into

account the absence of rites of passage rituals in contemporary society. In cultures where such rituals exist, spiritual development seems to proceed earlier in life.

Because our culture only dimly recognizes the value of traditional rites of passage, large numbers of us suffer changes in life status like victims, a burden to ourselves and others. (Foster and Little, 1989, p. 17)

Moore (2001) portrayed initiation as a powerful archetype, one that he posited must be repeated periodically to provide for entry into transformative space. In such a space there is the potential for developing new ways of being. Wilderness may be one. This study focused solely on transformation at the midlife transition, leaving questions about the experience of transformation at different stages to other researchers.

The transformation phenomenon in this study took place during a process of strenuous and prolonged walking in wilderness. A few theories of psychospiritual development incorporate an embodied component of existence. Among them are the theoretical models of Washburn (1999), Ruumet (1997), and Anderson (2004b). Spiral models of development including Ruumet's and Anderson's allow for a return or confrontation with unresolved life issues, although from a new developmental perspective. Midlife has often been characterized as a time when individuals return to address the concerns of their youth.

Ruumet's (1997) and Anderson's (2004b) models of spirituality address a range of areas including transformations in such things as relationships, health and illness of the body, and life's burning questions. These concerns have been central to the lives of women, but were often excluded from the concept of spiritual development. Thus, embodied models seem particularly important for charting the psychospiritual trajectories of women. For Washburn, the body itself is a significant marker of transformation.

Model 1: Washburn. Washburn (1999) described the developmental process as a journey to the true Self. Jung (1959) referred to the process as *individuation*. According to Washburn (1999), life begins with a profound connection to the deep psyche, the *Dynamic Ground*. As development continues to unfold, the focus of energy is oriented increasingly away from the Dynamic Ground and toward the world outside. As a result, a separate self is created that is predominately closed off from the energy of the Dynamic Ground.

If the child is to have a life of his or her own, he or she must end the symbiotic union with the Great Mother. Washburn referred to this closing off as *primal alienation*. The child covers over the Dynamic Ground. This includes the physical as well as psychic posture. The separation is accomplished by a tensing of the body. What is lost is receptivity to the movement of energy in the body, and the loss of its general arousability and capacity for ecstasy. Through this process, the body becomes an object and the ego becomes associated with the head.

Healthy development includes a continuing personal integration that is completed by the period of midlife when the focus of energy may again turn inward (Washburn, 1999). Washburn (1995) asserted that individuals and societies can become fixated at a particular level. He found that fixation at the ego stage results in a search for diversion or the development of narcissism that seems to be present in society today.

Whether one's narcissistic difficulties stem from insufficient mirroring and nurturing in early childhood.... or whether they emerge at midlife as a consequence of disillusionment in the identity project, the result is that a person becomes excessively self-centered and needy of being the center of other people's attentions. (Washburn, 1995, p. 115)

Washburn (1999) identified midlife as the opportunity for transformation to a new stage of psychospiritual development. The focus of energy may be reversed at this time to change the course of development to a more spiritual focus. The first phase of the ego's journey inward is often "a dark odyssey into the unconscious" or a descent to the Goddess. This descent is signaled by a reawakening of the body (Washburn, 2003, p. 28). Washburn called this process "the regression in the service of transcendence" (Washburn, 1999, p. 6). It ultimately returns the self to a profound connection with the Dynamic Ground. In order that the self may grow, a state of receptivity must be established for the transformation to take place (Washburn, 1999).

Model 2: Ruumet. Ruumet's (1997) model has similarities to Washburn's. She described the process of development as a helical or spiraling one. It is not linear in form. Ruumet characterized the developmental process as the "interdependence of the psychological, physical, and spiritual dimensions of our existence" (Ruumet, 1997, p. 6). Her model contains a detailed description of seven developmental centers that correspond to the body's energy wheels or *chakras*. The lower three centers of development represent the typical trajectory of personal or egoic development, including the work of establishing survival, kinship, and personal power. Ruumet's model specifies the primary goals of each center, including descriptions of the skills to be cultivated, healthy and unhealthy manifestations of the center, the nature of spirituality, and the basis for relating.

It is considered significant when an individual develops beyond the *egoic/power center*--the level of the achieving self (level three)--and moves forward to the *aloha center*, the "loving self" (level four) (Ruumet, 1997, p. 9). According to Ruumet (1997),

important psychospiritual transformation takes place at this fourth level. The person's concerns shift away from a focus on individual achievement and recognition. Primary goals become caring and sharing beyond kinship, above "need and greed." The skills manifested are empathy, kindness, and extending kinship to all humanity. Healthy manifestations include evidence of altruistic activity and an emphasis on a quality of life for everyone. Spirituality is understood as devotion and service to others and to an understanding of God as love.

As mentioned, Ruumet's (1997) model is a helical one. As individuals approach later stages of development, there is a tendency to return to the unresolved work of earlier stages. It frequently includes a return to the *survival center* and *emotional/cathetic center*. Concerns of an earlier level of development are re-experienced and subsequently resolved in a more expansive way.

Model 3: Anderson. Anderson (2004b) created a *Body Map* with clear embodied descriptions of each psychospiritual level of development. This model is also a spiral one in which returns to earlier levels of development may occur during periods of psychospiritual growth. There are 8 developmental levels in this model keyed to the overriding life goal, somatic stance, and healthy and unhealthy manifestations of its characteristics.

This model has more stages of development than Ruumet's model described above. The Body Map specifies the following 8 stages of development and their guiding questions:

1. *Vigilance Center*: "Am I safe?"
2. *Pleasure and Resilience Center*: "Am I secure and comfortable?"

3. *Belongingness Center*: “Am I getting enough love, attention, and respect?”
4. *Competence Center*: “What can I learn next?”
5. *Heart Center*: “What makes life meaningful?”
6. *Joyful Center*: “Am I expressing my unique talents in the world?”
7. *Serenity Center*: “Are others happy and content?”
8. *Awakened Center*: “No more questions” (Anderson, 2004b, pp. 1-16).

Anderson (2004b) stated that important themes and questions tend to appear predominately in one of these stages at a given time in life but that an individual may also have issues that appear in many or all stages simultaneously. There may also be a sense of fluctuating back and forth. Movement from Stage 5 to Stage 6 is a big jump in human development (Anderson, 2004). It signals growth into transegoic realms of development and is considered a significant occurrence.

Wounds as Openings

Developmental models provide an expected chronology for change and act as barometers of psychospiritual growth. They signal when something exceptional has taken place in the developmental realm. Washburn (2003) identified midlife as the expected time for a transformation from the personal level of development to the transpersonal. Yet transformational change is not predictable. It can be unexpected or sudden, when compared with the normal course of development. It is also not confined to a specific chronological age. What ripens a person for such an unexpected shift?

Emotional or spiritual wounding may act as such a readying agent for change. Imber (1994) found that most of the participants in a heuristic study of transformation had experienced childhood wounds they covered over in order to live a successful social

existence. When the participants experienced a shattering of their defensive structure, they were able to discover a deeper self. He characterized the process as one of tearing down to rebuild and moving from destruction to reconstruction. “The initial occurrence of a significant catalyst event opened the heart to the transcendent dimension” (Imber, 1994, p. 154). Imber found that this was often a painful process, sometimes even physically so.

Emotional wounds may also occur in adulthood through the loss of a relationship, a job, or one’s self esteem. A wound allows the psyche to open, so that questions can be asked and answered anew about the identity of the self (Plotkin, 2003).

The opening I experienced at mid-life was my disillusionment with the graduate program in which I had invested several years and my financial resources. It became increasingly apparent that I was headed in the wrong direction, that the career I thought I wanted was not right for me. Life seemed dull and lacked meaning. After a decision to leave graduate studies, I spent 2 years mired in grief with no sense of life direction. Being able to be open to this wound signaled the beginning of a process of transformation.

The Appalachian Trail and Its Hikers

The A.T. is a wilderness trail located on the populous East Coast of the United States. This mountainous footpath extends from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mt. Katahdin, Maine for approximately 2,000 miles. Appalachian Trail Conference (2004) statistics show that 3,241 people walked the trail from end-to-end between the years 1930 and 1999. Mueser (1998) surveyed long distance A.T. backpackers who were on the trail from several weeks to 6 months. One hundred thirty-six thru-hikers completed his survey. Seventy-four percent were male. Twenty-six percent were female. Their ages ranged

from 20 to 69. Reasons given for hiking included (a) challenge, 60 %; (b) love of the outdoors, 20 %; and (c) escape, 20 % (Mueser, 1998).

Between 1989 and 1993 there were 930 people who attempted to hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) in a single season. Of this group, 186 were successful (Mueser, 1998). Thru-hikers spend about 5 months dedicated almost exclusively to the pursuit of walking in wilderness. To attempt a thru-hike, a person must take an extended break from gainful employment, family, and friends. Survey statistics portray a composite picture of the typical thru-hiker. Mueser's hiker survey showed that 66% of the 136 respondents planned to hike the trail alone. The typical hiker reported that he or she had been contemplating the hike for about 10 years (Mueser, 1998). A thru-hike of the A.T. often represents a cherished dream with complex personal meanings for the individual. It is an heroic undertaking.

The A.T. has many qualities that make it a worthy locus for the study of psychospiritual transformation in wilderness. Despite the press of population and development on the East Coast of the United States, this narrow band of wilderness has been preserved and is maintained almost entirely by volunteers. The A.T. is often described as "the green tunnel" (Winters, 1998, p. 9) because its thick vegetation obscures any view of the world outside. Its route is a difficult one, generally following the ridge of the Appalachian Mountains and repeatedly climbing up and down.

Walking the A.T. has sometimes been likened to a pilgrimage (Winters, 2001) with Mt. Katahdin in Maine as the final destination. Hikers typically adopt a new name on the trail or receive one from other hikers. Many accounts include references to *trail magic*, the synchronicities that take place when something needed appears on the path.

The A.T. experience is considered an extraordinary one. When told of this study, one thru-hiker wrote, “Who hasn’t been transformed by their A.T. experience?”

Wilderness as a Catalyst for Psychospiritual Transformation

Previous sections of this chapter have focused on psychospiritual transformation and the wilderness area known as the A.T. In this section, the focus shifts to wilderness as a catalyst for psychospiritual transformation. There are many reasons to believe that spending time in wilderness may provide the means for psychospiritual transformation.

Creates Shifts in Awareness

Wilderness areas are often places where people do not initially feel at home. A different kind of alertness shows itself. Attention is an important element contributing to experiencing transformation. We are seldom attentive in daily life. Ordinary experience tends to have a manufactured quality or sameness about it that is repeated so often that it is no longer noticed. It is this researcher’s belief that this is lessened when we walk in wilderness. The wild world has infinite variety. Awareness shifts when we are in a wilderness setting and results in a growing attunement to being-ness and a focus on the intrinsic nature of things (Abram, 1996).

Evokes a Powerful Experience of Connectedness

Recognition of our human relatedness to nature is reflected in the ubiquity of nature symbolism used to describe human experience. We are familiar with rivers of tears, hearts like stone, free as a bird and oceans of love. The “call and response” of nature leads to the experience of a larger Self. This is exquisitely illustrated in Brill’s (1990) published account of his A.T. thru-hike. He spoke about a sense of connection to the cycles of nature and to his fellow human beings.

From watching the seasons yield one to the next, daylight surrender to night, and darkness give way to morning, I discovered in the midst of chaos order and purpose are present for us all. From the unqualified kindness shared among travelers in the backcountry, I learned that for all the cruelty loose in the world, people care deeply for their fellow creatures. (p. 185)

Conversely, loss of contact with nature is often accompanied by the experience of the disembodied self and a profound inner sense of spiritual disconnection (Abram, 1996). Primitive people projected their gods and their inner demons outward and were able to resolve their conflicts using myth and ritual. Today humankind's inner wild nature seems especially suspect. Perhaps this discomfort is implicated in our apparent compulsion to control or obliterate the outer wilderness. Learning to accept and honor the wildness within ourselves may be part of learning to care for the wilderness around us.

While the concept of wild nature may carry negative connotations, the qualities of wild-ness and of wild creatures described by Este's (1992) are positive. She studied the characteristics of wolves. Counter to their image in cultural stereotypes, she found them to be instinctive, playful, sensing, strong, relational, brave, stalwart, and adaptable. Jung wrote about nature as follows:

Whenever we touch nature we get clean...Matter in the wrong place is dirt. People who have gotten dirty from too much civilization take a walk in the woods, or a bath in the sea. Walking in the woods, lying in the grass, taking a bath in the sea, are from the outside; entering the unconscious, entering yourself through dreams is touching nature from the inside and this is the same thing, things are put right again. (Sabini, 2002, p.207)

Human existence has generally been confined to the boundaries of the skin, with all that lies outside perceived as other. Ecotherapists make use of wilderness settings to help clients re-establish contact with an expanded self (Clinebell, 1996; Cohen, 1997) I agree with these scholars' beliefs that when we enter true wilderness, we rediscover and reconnect with parts of ourselves.

Reflects the Inner Landscape

Like the wilderness, our bodies and the inner recesses of our consciousness are wild (Snyder, 1990). Jung (1956) was one of the first to theorize that there is an association between the unconscious inner world of the disowned self and the outer wilderness. Both are wild and sometimes feared.

Promotes Self-Actualization

Kuhn (2001) conducted a study of sailing as a transformative experience. She concluded from the responses to her on-line survey that the sailors' deep encounters with nature promoted the growth of self-actualizing values similar to those posited by Maslow (1999). Their responses included evidence of all 14 metavalues, including wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, and self-sufficiency. In addition, the participants shared additional values of being in the moment, of freedom, and of responsibility.

Facilitates Peak Experiences

An open focus in the sensuous surroundings of wilderness appears to be conducive to the occurrence of Maslow's (1999) description of peak experience. Cumes (1999) observed participants in various experiential outdoor programs and identified a phenomenon he called *wilderness rapture*. It is characterized by a feeling of inner peace, tranquility, oneness, and wholeness elicited by nature. The description of wilderness rapture is similar to Maslow's description of peak experiences.

Provides the Setting for Rites of Passage

Journeys on foot may offer opportunities for a radical revision of one's life. Wilderness walking has often been a rite of passage for important life transitions. Many cultures provide a distinct time for people to go wandering so that a metamorphosis can take place. The Australian Aborigine walkabout, the Native American vision quest, and the Basque youth journey through the Pyrenees Mountains are all examples (Plotkin, 2003).

The outer journey can become a metaphor for the inner one as the body's felt experience begins to mirror the journey of the soul. There are three stages to this journey, including severance from your life as it is lived, from your understanding of your self; and initiation into the life of the soul, and the incorporation of your new role in the community. Plotkin (2003) wrote about just such a transformative experience while hiking in wilderness.

As I ascended Cascade Mountain on snowshoes, climbing toward a gold and blue dome, I felt emotionally torn: on the one hand, I exulted in the freedom and wildness of the mountains--untamed nature, where I felt most at home. On the other, I dragged my professional life behind me like an anchor....upon reaching the summit, my understanding of life changed, and my adolescent trance ended. Lost in a sea of white peaks, I was pierced by an unfathomable sadness for a loss that was at once mine and not mine...Then, the truth exploded into my awareness. I heard myself gasp...My journey of descent began, mythically and literally, at the moment I drew my eyes from the promise glimmering far below and turned to take my first step off that snow-shrouded mountain. (pp.18-19)

Plotkin (2003) found that thinking, feeling, and perception often change markedly as a result of this type of transformation. For him, the change was so profound as to be likened to the formation of a new self. There can be a sense of immense loneliness once it becomes clear that you must rely upon yourself, that no one else can do this work for you.

Creates Openings for Individuals with Wounds

Hendee and Pitstick (1995) concluded that individuals in transition or those suffering from emotional trauma or crisis are more likely to be open to what the wilderness has to offer. It is as if the wound breaches the soul, and the psyche can open. As a result, new questions are asked about one's identity (Houston, 1987). Plotkin (2003) asserted that there is a sacred quality in being willing to release the old stories so that a new story can emerge. He stated that healing work with sacred wounds loosens our attachment to our former identity and allows a new one to emerge.

Positively Affects Personal and Social Attitudes and Values

The manufactured quality of daily existence is a far cry from our former intimate connections with nature and the embodied self. A continual mirroring of the inner and outer worlds is always taking place. According to Hillman and Ventura (1992), when one world is disconnected, so too is the other. This mirroring is implicated in society's dual ecological and psychospiritual crises. Distrust of others and ourselves is reflected in our relationship with nature. Abram (1996) found that when individuals re-establish contact with wilderness, they begin to experience its rhythmic qualities, dependability, and goodness. Reconnection leads to a greater degree of psychological integration and engenders a corresponding environmental ethic. The small self expands to become an all encompassing Self (Abram, 1996).

Ecophilosophers believe that recognition of our true nature leads naturally to an attitude of care for the earth. Naess (as cited in Fox, 1990) stated:

Care flows naturally if the "self" is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves...just as we need not morals to make us breathe...[so] if your "self" in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care...You care for yourself

without feeling any moral pressure to do it—provided you have not succumbed to a neurosis of some kind, developing self-destructive tendencies, or hating yourself. (p. 70)

Macy (1991) asserted that the healing of the self and the world will take place simultaneously.

It is my experience that the world itself has a role to play in our liberation. Its very pressures, pains, and risks can wake us up, release the bonds of ego and guide us home to our vast, true nature. (p. 8)

Results in Profound and Permanent Personal Changes

Riordan (2002) identified changes in individuals after they participated in a sustained outdoor adventure activity. The changes include a commitment to “personal and passionate work, living in close proximity to a natural environment, or adopting a green lifestyle where their actions and behaviors in daily life echo their wilderness experience” (p. iv). The following quote from an A.T. thru hiker’s journal is illustrative of just such a change.

Shortly after returning from the trail, I moved to a farm by Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania...a stone’s throw from the Appalachian Trail. Here, I paint and write, maintain a section of the trail, and bring home hikers to remind me of it. I hike nearly every day. (Ross, 1982, p. 125)

May Be Necessary for Mental Health

Some researchers (Clinebell, 1996; Cohen, 1997) argued that wilderness is necessary for human psychological well-being. Glendinning (1994) asserted that there has been an increase in psychological dysfunction in our technological society. Alienation from the self may become increasingly problematic as the distance between people and nature grows (Glendinning, 1994).

Provides Openings for Inner Awareness and Shifts in Consciousness

Simple environments seem to produce opportunities for inner awareness and changes in consciousness. Cumes (1998) researched outdoor education groups such as those conducted by the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). He concluded that inner awareness is likely to take place when the tasks of daily life have few if any technical challenges or the need for complex decision making. Interest, curiosity, and fascination were found to characterize this state of awareness. They are the same qualities that characterize the peak experience he referred to as “wilderness rapture” that was previously discussed in this chapter.

Hastings (2004) asserted that nature itself can be a catalyst for the emergence of an altered state of consciousness. In an altered state, individuals can experience a higher incidence of ESP, telepathy, and clairvoyance (Hasting, 2004). Maslow (1999) noted its connection to peak experiences. Wilderness experiences may lead to a shift in consciousness similar to that experienced by meditators.

Segal (n.d.) studied individuals who had a meaningful experience in wilderness.

This phenomenological research revealed how the wilderness experience can lead to a felt realization that, “I have a mind and body and emotion, but I am not a mind and body and emotions.” If one is open and ready for the experience, this type of consciousness seems to occur almost naturally in wilderness settings. In the research, subjects spoke of a “mirroring” quality of the wilderness which allowed them to see themselves with new awareness. One subject who had experience with a sense of connectedness that came from meditative practice stated, “When your meditating...what’s in you is doing the meditation, but out there the whole thing is a meditation and it’s coming into me instead. (pp. 9-10)

Brings the Embodied Self into Awareness and Mirrors It

A distinct quality of walking (or hiking) in wilderness is the human body’s active participation. The act of walking is primal. It has the potential for returning the walker to

an awareness of the embodied self. The *embodied self* has been described as the breathing, moving body that is a physical manifestation of the Self (Abram, 1996).

Segal (n.d.) identified two primary and common orientations to wilderness experiences: physical challenge and psycho-spiritual ritual. She described these as two poles on a body/mind continuum and found that both are necessary to relate to wilderness as a whole person. Wilderness hiking is a physical undertaking. The hiker is challenged to go beyond usual physical limitations and to become present to the body.

A solitary hiking experience also allows for reverie, observation, and reflection. Legault (1992) conducted a phenomenological study of adults engaged in movement during an extended time in wilderness. Participants interacted with the environment through dance. They expressed a new level of connection and appreciation for wilderness as evidenced in self reports, interviews, and observation. “Body movement in nature, even in its simplest form, supports and activates the aesthetic dimension of wilderness experience” (Legault, 1992, p. 96).

Abram (1996) posited that getting in touch with this breathing, moving body also has the effect of re-attuning the walker to the senses and of evoking a resonance within. The sameness of the everyday world disappears. Nature’s sensuous qualities and its infinite variability have the power to call the wanderer to attention. Identification with the wild world frequently shows itself in poetic or sensuous expressions. This is a defining characteristic of embodied writing. What is outside is also inside. “The blood pulsing through our veins insinuates the rush of a stream, or the wash of waves upon the strand” (Anderson, 2002, p. 40).

According to Plotkin (2003), the soul is embodied or made visible in the world in the form of a person's core values, abilities, and knowledge. These *core powers* are central to character and form the foundation of one's soul-level uniqueness. Spending time in close proximity to nature brings the walker into a closer relationship with a unified Self.

[A]n individual's harmony with his or her "own deep self" requires not merely a journey to the interior but a harmonizing with the environmental world. The deepest self cannot be confined to "in here" because we can't be sure it is not also or even entirely "out there." (Hillman, 1995, p. xix)

A.T. Hikers' Journals

A number of published accounts have been written by A.T. thru-hikers. The Appalachian Trail Conference listed 20 memoirs written between the years 1948 and 2000. They provide another perspective on the wilderness walking experience and reiterate many of the psychospiritual transformation qualities described in this section.

Amy Ross (1982) walked the trail with two female hiking partners in the 1970s. She decided to hike the trail after her life became devoid of meaning. Ross' journal began as follows:

In Philadelphia, in a high rise...I exist. Have done so for two years...attending art school, striving to fulfill some dream of becoming a painter. Lately I'm slipping...out of touch...losing the meaning of life. (p. 5)

A transformative experience is traced in the pages through a description of her feelings as she interacted with nature and her fellow thru-hikers. Upon her return home, Ross chose a home near the trail where she could walk almost every day and where she could dedicate herself to providing assistance to other hikers. She reflected on her experience as follows:

Roaming...especially being footloose in the wilderness is just plain incredible. I've never felt more alive or free in any other situation. But I have a strong need to give something back to the world. After it has given me so much. It taught me, made my heart gentle, gave me understanding and wisdom. I feel now I must return some sort of positive addition to mankind. (Ross, 1982, p. 123)

David Brill's (1990) published story of his 1970s thru-hike has remained one of the most popular accounts. Brill sought out the trail in his early 20s to find out "what he was made of." He used the words of Thoreau to explain his motive for the walk: to live "simply and deliberately, with room to grow, to breathe, to change, to discover what really mattered to me" (p. 14). During the course of his journey, he reflected on the meaning of fear and confidence, solitude and friendship, self-reliance and interdependence. Brill's memoirs were written 11 years later, suggesting that the experience was still very much alive for him after all that time. He summed up his experiences as being the most significant ones of his life.

Over the past eleven months, my memories of the months on the trail have survived as a time of sublime happiness, a time when I felt my neurons being switched on for the very first time. I doubt that any other event of my life will choke me with as much emotion, fill me with as much pride, or define more clearly who I am than my summer on the Appalachian Trail. (p. 187)

Kelly Winters (2001) made her decision to hike the A.T. in the 1990s after a failed love relationship and growing disillusionment with her work life. She referred to the hike as a pilgrimage during which she hoped to find meaning. Winters never completed her goal to reach Mt. Katahdin. After she returned home, she knew she had received the healing for which she yearned.

Certainty grows in me that there's a *place* I need to get to; not a physical place but an emotional, psychological, spiritual one. And although the place is not physical, somehow the only way to get there is to physically walk—a long, slow, arduous process. A pilgrimage. (p. 8)

Winters described the many ways in which she changed as she walked. “Your old difficulties, obsessions, and problems follow you, riding in your pack, making you tired, until you eventually outwalk them” (Winters, 2001, p. 326). Her lifestyle after returning home became earth friendly and connected to the trail.

...I sleep on the floor. I go for several days without taking a shower, wearing the same clothes because my concept of cleanliness has changed. If I haven't sweated in my clothes, they don't seem dirty. I go on walks that last all day. (Winters, 2001, p. 327)

Within a year after her thru-hike, Winters found her vocation as a freelance writer. She moved to a cabin by the ocean, and she committed herself in a satisfying love relationship.

The Cumberland Times News published the journal installments of Michael Snyder and Julia Geilser as they thru-hiked the A.T. during the 2004 season. Snyder wrote at the beginning of their journey:

Our goal is not just to hike the Appalachian Trail, it is to test the endurance of our spirit and to seek above all things the limitlessness of our potential. We search for what lies at the end of the trail, but more so, we search for what lies within ourselves. (Snyder, 2004a, p. 1C)

Snyder described an experience of wilderness rapture as he touched the top of Mt. Katahdin at the end of the trail.

The frame of time cracked and my mind bent as my consciousness poured out. “It's happening again,” was my last lucid thought as everything unwound and spilled over. And everything was frozen there in timeless clarity and I left myself and saw myself standing there, and then saw too, all at once as if compiled into a singularity of perception, the whole of the trail stretched out behind and within me. ...I saw simultaneously reflected in the 10,000 mirrors of understanding I had gathered on reflected reality. (Snyder, 2004b, p. 2C)

Stories, Metaphors, and Myths and Psychospiritual Transformation

Thus far in this chapter psychospiritual transformation and its pertinent developmental models have been clearly defined, the A.T. has been described, and

evidence of wilderness as a catalyst for psychospiritual transformation has been presented. With this information as a back drop, the perspective that stories, myths, and metaphors are companions of psychospiritual transformation is offered to the reader.

Stories

We are ushered into the world of imagination by a storytelling experience. The contents of the unconscious mind become available upon entering a transegoic state. Washburn's (1999) has described a reconnection with the Dynamic Ground. During the storytelling experience, calculative thinking plays a subordinate role to imagination and to the feelings of the heart. Storytelling may also play a role in the integration of peak experiences (Dufrechou, 2002) and create a pathway for psychospiritual transformation. Stories provide an opportunity for deep inner change through their capacity to integrate heart and mind (Clements, 2003).

Metaphors

Metaphors have often served as vehicles for meaning-making and as pathways to self-understanding. Metzner (1980) identified ten classical metaphors for the transformation of consciousness. They include (a) dream sleep to awakening; (b) illusion to realization; (c) darkness to enlightenment; (d) imprisonment to liberation; (e) fragmentation to wholeness; (f) separation to oneness; (g) being on a journey to arriving at the destination; (h) being in exile to coming home; (i) seed to flowering tree; and (j) death to rebirth. One metaphor may resonate more fully than others for an individual and serve as a signpost on the Great Journey (Metzner, 1980). The metaphors have an archetypal quality that helps give meaning to experience. Washburn (1999) used metaphor to describe transformative experience as the return home.

The spiral interpretation of human development gives psychological formulation to the spiritual archetype that depicts life as a pathway, pilgrimage, or journey of departure into the world and return home, where the home to which we return is and is not the same as the home from which we departed. (p. 134)

The concept of metamorphosis is an archetypical theme that appears in many cultures. It symbolizes the transition from a known form to one that is incommensurable. Nature-based symbols like the butterfly have been used to symbolize the soul's transformation among the Greeks and Egyptians. The butterfly has frequently appeared in the mystical and religious literature of East and West. Jungians use the symbolism of metamorphosis to represent the process of transformation (Metzner, 1980).

Myths

Psychospiritual transformation has often been portrayed in mythic ways. Smith (2002) called myths "realizations that are expressed in symbolic form" (p. 2). Campbell (1968) noted that the hero's journey is often used to symbolize the path of transformation. Smith (2002) used it to represent the movement from sickness to health and healing in the field of nursing. Riordan (2001) referred to the hero myth as a symbol for a return from wilderness adventure and the ensuing integration of its lessons into ordinary life. She found that the stories of wilderness adventurers echoed mythic themes of facing challenge, transforming, and returning.

Murdock (1990) narrated mythic stories of women's transformation in *The Heroine's Journey*. Among the myths retold is the ancient Sumerian tale of two sisters: Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld, and Innana, Goddess of Heaven and Earth. Ereshkigal represents the feminine principle, including the body that has been banished. She is feminine power that has been split off from consciousness. Innana chooses to descend into the abyss to attend the funeral of her sister's husband. She is imprisoned

there and must confront her own dark side, the rage and fury unexpressed as a result of trying to please the masculine elements of the culture and the self. It is in the depths that Innana becomes whole again.

The descent to the Goddess may be a fitting metaphor for the experience of wilderness transformation. Gauthier (2003) studied transformative change in men and women at mid-life. She found that all her participants, irrespective of gender, made such a descent in the service of expanded self-awareness and healthy ego development. “In Western cultures, we live as if the spiritual descent is no longer necessary; we live without realizing that the journey is meant for each one of us” (Plotkin, 2003, p. 12).

Summary: Creating the Preliminary Lenses

This review of the literature suggests that wilderness has the power to initiate psychospiritual transformation, evidenced both inwardly and outwardly. Characteristics of psychospiritual transformation described in this chapter, my experiences in wilderness, and written accounts of other A.T. hikers (Brill, 1990; Ross, 1982; Winters, 2001) were used to create preliminary interpretative lenses for understanding the data. These lenses appear in Cycle 1 at the end of the Research Methods chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The chapter begins with comments on the topic and research methods chosen for this study. It contains sections on the Organic Inquiry and Intuitive Inquiry methods, validity, participants, procedures, instruments, planned treatment of the data, and Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 1, which clarifies the research topic.

Researcher's Comments

Nature and wilderness have been an integral part of my spiritual life. As the years pass, I have spent increasingly longer periods of time hiking wilderness trails. I have experienced a growing desire to cross the threshold into the transforming space of wilderness. My ultimate goal was to become a thru-hiker of the Appalachian Trail, to walk it end-to-end in a single year. Instead, I immersed myself in a deep personal study of others' experience. The topic arose unbidden as I engaged in meditative walking in nature.

Before I entered the doctoral program at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), I registered for an elective course in Creative Expression. I chose journaling and walking in wilderness for my long-term project. This period of time was marked by unparalleled creative inspiration and by rapid transformative change. I found myself writing poetry, drawing, painting, and taking photographs that seemed to reveal an unknown self. I returned to wilderness regularly and always reconnected to the muse there.

Organic and intuitive approaches to research guided this study. I selected 12 female A.T. thru-hikers to tell their stories of sacred transformation. The stories appear in the women's own words. I encouraged the women to honor non-rational ways of

knowing, including inspiration from nature and meditative walking. They were also encouraged to engage in creative endeavors. As a result, they submitted creative work and artifacts that further reveal their experience of change. Their individual stories formed the foundation of the group's story.

Organic Inquiry

The Organic Inquiry method was a fitting approach to this study of transformative experience. Clements (2003) recommended it for the study of topics of great personal, spiritual, and transpersonal meaning and “for studying experiences of transformative change that have occurred in the lives of the participants” (p. 9). Its emphasis is personal rather than general, and it focuses on detail rather than abstract generalizations (Clements, 2003).

Storytelling

Organic Inquiry seeks to preserve the sacred integrity of the experience that is being investigated. “The fundamental technique of organic research is telling and listening to stories” (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Stories formed the core of this study. The women's experiences were gathered in a spirit of reverence. Clements (2003) asserted that storytelling provides a means for the integration of transformative experience for the teller. She also maintained that reading stories has the power to induce a transformative experience for the reader through an engagement of mind, heart, and spirit. The stories in this study were edited, to reduce their length while retaining their transformational character.

Non-Rational Approaches to Knowing

Non-rational methods (Clements, 2003) of inspiration and intuition play an important role in defining the parameters of Organic Inquiry. After the foundational steps of the study are completed, the ego's control is relinquished for a time so that other types of experience may be tapped. Meditative experiences, dreams, attunement with nature, synchronicities, and creativity are honored as ways of knowing. They open the way to more general and universal understandings.

Several phases of this study invited liminal experience. The study's seed was a numinous experience that arose during a period of meditative walking. These walking experiences in nature opened a door for me to creative expression that included spontaneous visual and poetic representations. Creativity flowed as if guided by a deeper knowing. The participants in this study were invited to incorporate non-verbal and creative ways to convey their experience.

Organic Inquiry encourages non-rational ways of knowing in the data analysis process as well. As a result, I engaged in meditative walking in preparation for the various steps of analyzing the results of this research, and an ongoing record of the research experience that includes important dreams and synchronicities is included in this dissertation.

Intuitive Inquiry

Anderson (2003) described Intuitive Inquiry as an epistemology of the heart, bridging the gap between art and science. "[I]ntuitive Inquiry is a search for new understandings through focused attention of one researcher's passion and compassion for themselves, others, and the world" (Anderson, 2004, p. 2). Like Organic Inquiry, it seeks

to honor non-rational ways of knowing and to incorporate knowledge from dreams, synchronicities, and meditative experience. Intuitive Inquiry is an attempt to join intuition with intellectual precision. While Organic Inquiry is particularly well suited to answering the question, “What is the experience of wilderness transformation?,” Intuitive Inquiry provided the tools to arrive at a conceptualization or interpretation of the experience (Braud, 1998). The steps or Cycles of Intuitive Inquiry as outlined by Anderson (2003) are described below.

Cycles of Interpretation

Intuitive Inquiry is a hermeneutical research method with five cycles of interpretation: (a) Cycle 1: Clarifying the research topic; (b) Cycle 2: Identifying preliminary lenses; (c) Cycle 3: Collecting original data and preparing research reports; (d) Cycle 4: Transforming and refining the lenses; and (e) Cycle 5: Integrating the findings and the literature review. I implemented the Cycles in the manner described below.

Cycle 1: Clarifying the Research Topic

The first cycle of inquiry uses intuition to clarify a research topic. The topic should be personally significant and compelling, something that claims the attention, though the reasons may not be initially clear. Once the topic appears, daily meditative encounters with a text or image are engaged and intuitive insights are noted. Thoughts, daydreams, conversations, and intuitions are all part of the process, allowing the research image to become resolved and complete. The specific processes used in Cycle 1 of this study appear at the end of this chapter.

Cycle 2: Identifying Preliminary Lenses

During the second cycle of inquiry, a set of preliminary lenses for interpretation is created. For this study many published accounts of A.T. thru-hikers were reviewed and two pilot interviews with wilderness hikers were conducted. Themes arising from these encounters were noted, as well as those from my personal experiences. These preliminary lenses became an entry point for understanding the stories of the women. The Cycle 2 lenses appear in the Results chapter.

Cycle 3: Collecting Original Data and Preparing Research Reports

In the third cycle of inquiry, intuitive processes are again used to collect and prepare research reports. There were three distinct processes included in this research study: (a) incorporating meditative nature walking to increase sensitivity to the stories, followed by both listening to and reading interview transcripts; (b) honoring creative expression as a way of knowing--the women's artistic work is included as data in the Results chapter and Appendix I; and (c) incorporating my responses to their artistic expression or chosen image.

Cycle 4: Transforming and Refining the Lenses

In the fourth cycle of inquiry, the researcher uses the data collected in Cycle 3 either to confirm or to refute initial understandings as presented in the Cycle 2 preliminary lenses. The process sets the stage a new set of lenses to emerge. Intuition was critical in noting patterns emerging from the data. I drew mandalas while listening to the interview tapes. I next transferred the themes that appeared in the mandalas to a large sheet of paper, and I used a variety of colored lines and symbols to connect similar

themes. The process generated a new set of individual and group themes of transformation that would ultimately allow me to modify the initial lenses.

Using the research tools of both Intuitive Inquiry and Organic Inquiry, I wrote a group story. My first version of the women's stories resonated strongly with the myth of Innana, including themes of wounding and healing, of descent and rebirth. The group story represented the researcher's understanding of the wilderness transformation experience portrayed as a narrative. It was presented to the participants in a group session. Feedback was solicited, but the participants recommended no changes.

During this session, each participant was also asked to identify a visual metaphor for her journey from a selection of Celtic symbol drawings or to create her own from art materials that were supplied. The chosen images appear before each woman's writing and story in the Results chapter and contributed to the process of refining Cycle 2 lenses.

Cycle 5: Integrating the Findings and the Literature Review

In the fifth and final cycle of inquiry, intuition is again used to interweave all that is known. The research literature is integrated with the emerging lenses created in Cycle 4. The efficacy of the process itself is evaluated. Then, the final set of lenses is presented. The goal is to paint a science-based description of the phenomenon studied that incorporates a heart-felt way of knowing.

Validity

Validity was established using various means. These included the incorporation of sympathetic resonance, knowledge gained through the researcher's personal experience, and the use of embodied writing.

Sympathetic Resonance

The phenomenon known as *sympathetic resonance* involves the reader's reaction to the experience of a research participant. It has been described as "an internal feeling of certainty, a noetic, intuitive, and persistent feeling that one's knowledge is true" (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 221). It occurs when the reader shares a participant's experience when it is conveyed in an embodied way. Sympathetic resonance has been likened to the vibration of one string of an instrument when another string of the same instrument is plucked (Braud & Anderson, 1998).

A resonance of experience is one means of establishing validity:

[A] strong and full reaction of the reader...can serve as a faithful, valid indicator that the researcher, through the aid of the research participants, has accurately portrayed a particular signal experience well enough for the resonating reader to distinguish it and affirm it as a faithfully recounted experience. (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 225)

With the concept of sympathetic resonance in mind, Anderson (2002b) and her students developed *resonance panels* to aid in establishing the validity of an experience. If the participants' descriptions resonate with the panel members, there is a sense that the experience is a valid one. Thus, each panel member's response, as well as each reader's response to the participants' stories, is an important means of establishing validity (Anderson, 1998).

In this study, a resonance panel of two non-participating women was used to review participants' stories. The panel members were themselves A.T. thru-hikers who volunteered for the study but could not be included because the prescribed number of participants had already been met.

Researcher's Personal Experience

My personal experience was an asset, but it could also have been a potential threat to validity. Walking in wilderness is very familiar to me. Prior to this study, I engaged in intentional meditative walking and spent consecutive days walking on wilderness trails in New York's Adirondack Park and on the A.T. My 6-day walking pattern is similar to the walking style of many A.T. thru-hikers who take a day off after 6 days of walking. The use of a resonance panel became a counter-balance for any potential biases or blind spots that might have resulted from the influence of my experiences.

Embodied Writing

Embodied writing was used as another means of establishing validity. Anderson described *embodied writing* as “a research technique that records the finely textured nuances of lived experience, awakening the senses in the writer and inviting a kindred resonance in readers” (Anderson, 2003b, p. 5). The goal is “to bring a fuller understanding of the human experience to the conduct of research” (Anderson, 2002b, p. 41). Anderson (2002) listed the characteristics of embodied writing as follows: (a) true to life, vivid depictions that “ring a bell” for the reader; (b) inclusion of both internal and external data related to the experience; (c) descriptions written from the inside out as the body speaks for itself (d) concrete and rich sensory details slowed down in time to capture nuances; (e) description attuned to the living body; and (f) typically first person narratives embedded in experience.

Experiences of great personal significance are more likely to be shared if the primary researcher is open to sharing her experience. I shared a short embodied writing piece with the participants. They were then given instructions on how to complete their

own embodied writing piece. The topic was a time when they felt especially close to nature. Selections of embodied writing from their A.T. thru-hiking experience are included as research data in the Results chapter.

The sample below illustrates how becoming fully present to one's experience can provide an opening into subjective experience for the reader. The writing is my own.

I am walking down an unpaved country road with no expectations. The day is full of doubt and frustrated desire. It is twilight, and I have resolved to be present in my body. This walking is deeply familiar. I can become lost inside myself. Now I feel the presence of their eyes. Across the open field at the edge of the woods they stand transfixed. I feel the touch of their eyes on my body. I recall this mysterious experience from other walks. The herd of white tailed deer hesitates and then bounds off into the woods. Some time later, two very large herds stand on the surrounding hills, allowing me to share their space. It is springtime. There is the sweet smell of apple blossoms everywhere, a recollection of the endless cycle of rebirth.

I am walking in hopes of finding myself. There is a gnawing hunger for connection somewhere in my chest. After many minutes of walking, I look up from the road to take my bearings. Suddenly the world wraps itself around me with the soft tenderness of a lover, very close and intimate. The experience is so surprising and sudden that tears fill my eyes, my breathing quickens, and great sobs rack my chest. There is a feeling of indescribable tenderness. In this moment, I know something fundamental has shifted. I am no longer alone.

Embodied writing was incorporated as a way of inviting the reader to enter deeply into another's experience. The experience is considered valid and true if it resonates with the reader.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with a mid-life, female A.T. thru-hiker in her home. She had completed her hike approximately 13 years prior to the interview but was still eager to talk about her experience. Her log home was nestled on a rustic hillside. It was obvious from the snowshoes on the porch and the ready backpack that she still spends time in the outdoors on a regular basis. She excitedly shared numerous photos from her

hike and spent over an hour telling the story. I found myself surrounded by trail memorabilia, though the experience was long past. It was clear from this early interview that the passage of time had not lessened the meaning of the experience. Its meaning may actually have deepened. This interview was instrumental in my decision to recruit individuals who had some time to settle into their experience and to make meaning of what had taken place.

Participants

Selection Criteria

Participation was limited to 12 women who were 21 or older as they entered the study and who had thru-hiked the A.T. within the last 15 years. Participants in this study were individuals who self-identified as having experienced a psychospiritual transformation as a result of their hike. They were individually interviewed about their experience, completed a piece of embodied writing, and met as a group to share their stories.

Gender

There were several reasons for limiting this study to women. Greenway (1995) found that wilderness has distinctly different effects on women and men. I chose to study women, because more research has historically been directed at men. In addition, I believed that participation in this study would enhance the women's self-esteem and feelings of empowerment and facilitate the completion of their transformative experience.

There were concerns that finding female participants would be challenging, but this did not turn out to be the case. The number of female A.T. thru-hikers is relatively small. Statistics show that women represent a minority of A.T. thru-hikers. In 1998,

Mueser noted that only 20 % of recent thru-hikers were female, based on data gathered from trail registers in the early 1990s. Current figures place it at about 25 % (Appalachian Trail Conference, 2004). The percentage would increase to 50% if walkers who day hike and return home at the end of the day were included (Mueser, 1998).

Female thru-hikers are also by personality type a statistically unusual group. Lacy used the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to study thru-hikers during the 1990s and found that the extroversion/introversion percentages were reversed in thru-hikers compared to the general population. This was more exaggerated among women. While the estimate of extraverts in the U.S. female population is 75%, the figure for female thru-hikers is 23% (Mueser, 1998). Personality style may make female thru-hikers especially reflective about their experience, but this characteristic also has the potential for making them less likely to share their experiences with a stranger.

Type of Hiker

Thru-hikers are often defined as people who complete the A.T. trail end-to-end in a single, continuous journey. For the purposes of this study, it was expected that participants would take occasional leaves from the trail for food re-supply, mail drops, laundry, doctor's visits, and so forth. One woman left the trail because of a job offer. Another returned home after the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center. Both completed their hike a few months later.

Section hikers, those people who complete the A.T. trail end-to-end by hiking sections of the trail over time, were excluded from participation in this study. Short section hikes limit (a) the ability of the body to become truly conditioned to the rigors of

walking; (b) the capability of becoming socially bonded with a group of fellow walkers; and (c) the feeling of becoming completely estranged from civilization (Mueser, 1998).

Age

While the age criterion was set at 21 or older, attempts were made to include as many older participants as possible. This was based on the belief that being middle-aged or older would increase the likelihood of having an experience of transformation. Ruumet (1997) posited mid-life as the time when identification with ego yields to the guidance of a greater Self. Most A.T. thru-hikers are younger than 40. Younger people comprised 74% of survey respondents, and the average age was 29 (Mueser, 1998). Older people often section hike the A.T., walking 2 to 3 weeks at a time over a number of years (Mueser, 1998).

Psychospiritual Transformation

For Clements (2003), the characteristics of transformative change include (a) greater awareness and contact with self; (b) greater awareness and contact with spirit; and (c) increased service to others. These characteristics were used to help determine eligibility for participation in this study.

Recruitment

A brief description of the study, along with participant selection criteria and contact information appeared in the bi-monthly publication called the *ATN: Appalachian Trailway News* and in the newsletter of the Genesee Valley Chapter, Adirondack Mountain Club (Appendix G). The Appalachian Trail Conference supplied email addresses of female thru-hikers who were willing to be contacted as research participants. These women were given the information that appeared in the publications.

Each responding woman was emailed or mailed a Letter of Invitation (Appendix A). It more fully described the study as an opportunity to reflect upon and share a story of transformation that took place while thru-hiking the A.T. It also described the selection criteria, time commitment, and activity requirements. As part of the selection criterion, transformative change was defined as persistent, wide reaching in scope, and profoundly affecting life. This letter also included Clements' (2003) characteristics of transformative change: (a) greater awareness and contact with self; (b) greater awareness and contact with spirit; and (c) increased service to others.

Each woman was asked to evaluate her experience using the selection criteria, particularly the definitions of transformation. Those who determined they were eligible were instructed on how to contact the researcher via email, mail, or telephone.

Selection

One week after an email exchange or after mailing the Letter of Invitation (Appendix A) to the potential participant, the researcher telephoned several women to determine if they were still interested in participating in the study and if they met the selection criteria. For several others, the process continued through email. Women who were interested and met the selection criteria were included in the study. The researcher next (a) solicited information about the woman's motivation for taking her A.T. thru-hike; (b) explained the data collection procedures; and (c) addressed any initial questions the participant had about the study.

Procedures

Procedures included mailing the information packet, collecting the embodied writing exercise, conducting the meditative nature walk and individual storytelling

session, collecting artifacts and creative work, creating the preliminary version of the group story, and conducting the group storytelling session.

Incorporating Intuition

Before describing the procedures in detail, it is important to mention that intuition was incorporated throughout the researcher's conduct of the study and in the participants' involvement in it. The research approach incorporated walking in nature, meditation, and creative expression to encourage intuitive understanding. The participants were encouraged to remain open to intuitive inspiration by walking and drawing. I walked to process the stories and engaged in creative writing and creative expression after reading the participants' stories. I noted any synchronicities or significant dreams and described these in the Research Journal. Intuition was also important in identifying the group story.

Mailing the Information Packet

After an individual was selected to participate in the study, the researcher mailed an information packet. This packet consisted of a Letter of Gratitude (Appendix B) for her willingness to participate in the study, an Informed Consent Form (Appendix C), a Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D), and Embodied Writing Instructions (Appendix F) on how to complete a piece of embodied writing. Each woman was instructed to complete and mail to the researcher the Informed Consent Form, the Demographic Questionnaire, and her embodied writing piece as soon as possible.

The Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D) solicited information about the participant's age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious preferences, relationship status, occupation, and education level. It was used to gather preliminary information about the participant's thru-hike, such as hike dates and length of hike.

In the Letter of Gratitude (Appendix B), each woman was encouraged to review any personal artifacts from the trail, including journals, letters she sent home, artistic creations, and photos. Each was encouraged to bring these artifacts to the individual storytelling session.

Collecting the Embodied Writing Exercise

Each participant was also given instructions on how to complete a piece of embodied writing (Appendix F). The assigned topic was a time when she felt extremely close to nature during her A.T. hiking experience. The writing exercise was intended to help the participant refocus deeply on her experience of transformation. The directions for completing the exercise included an emphasis on the use of rich sensory details. The participant was asked to send back the completed embodied writing piece by mail. This took place prior to the meditative nature walk and individual storytelling session. Selections of participants' embodied writing pieces are included in the Results chapter.

Conducting the Meditative Nature Walk and Individual Storytelling Session

After receiving the participant's Informed Consent Form, Demographic Questionnaire, and embodied writing piece, participants were telephoned to determine a mutually agreed upon date, time, and place for the meditative nature walk followed by the individual storytelling session. For the meditative nature walk, each woman selected a location where it was possible to hike together for 30 minutes prior to the individual storytelling session. For the individual storytelling session, a location was selected that was quiet and private to facilitate audio-taping. The participants were also given the option to meet near my home. Calls were made to participants confirming the

arrangements 5 days before the scheduled meditative nature walk and individual storytelling sessions.

Meditative Nature Walk

It was important to set the stage for stories of transformation to show up. Before our meeting, an intention was set that nature might create an opening for a woman's story to unfold. Participants engaged in a pre-arranged meditative nature walk in a forested area with me prior to the individual storytelling session. I asked each woman to note any objects or processes she was drawn to on the walk that were symbolic of her transformative experience. I asked each participant to describe what she noticed and its meaning for her.

Individual Storytelling Session

Immediately after the completion of the meditative nature walk, we retired to a quiet and private location that was more conducive to audio-taping, and I initiated the individual storytelling session. The interviews were approximately 90 minutes long and consisted of three layers of questions. They began with a general, open-ended invitation and then moved to more specific questions that focused on topics not covered by the participant (Appendix E). Each woman was assured of anonymity. The interviews were facilitated by the use of active listening skills, a technique used in my work as a psychotherapist. This included the use of paraphrasing and open-ended questions to facilitate the fullest rendition of the story. The storytelling was audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. After a week of incubation, an edited version of the story was prepared. I drew mandalas in response to hearing each one. The mandalas defined the character of the group story.

Collecting the Artifacts and Creative Work

After the individual storytelling session, attention shifted to a review of the women's creative work and trail artifacts. If a woman submitted creative work, she was asked to discuss its meaning for her. The same process was used for any artifacts. Permission was requested to photograph these. Photos are included in Appendix I.

Creating the Preliminary Version of the Group Story

After the meditative nature walks and individual storytelling sessions were completed, I read and listened to the women's transcripts repeatedly. I also reviewed all the artifacts and creative works. After listening to the collected stories, I walked. My meditative walking experiences were interspersed with more focused reviews of the transcripts. I found that the central theme of the group's story of transformation very quickly emerged in response to this process.

Conducting the Group Storytelling Session

The women were invited to meet as a group to share their stories with each other, to create or select an image for their journey, and to assist in the development of a group story. As part of the group storytelling session, a series of approximately 50 black and white drawings that accompanied Anderson's (1998) retelling of Celtic myths was placed about the room. Participants were invited to select images they believed symbolized their experience of transformation or to create a visual image of their own using art materials.

The preliminary version of the group story of transformation was read aloud. Participants were encouraged to make any changes or additions. As a response to these experiences, the group storytelling concluded with an invitation to the women to engage

in a creative celebration of music, dance, and visual arts. I requested permission to photograph or record any creative work, which appears in Appendix I.

Identifying Metaphors and Refining Group Story

The women's chosen or created visual metaphors/transformative images were copied and included along with a description in the Results chapter with each woman's story. Key words were identified in their descriptions of these images. These were helpful in confirming the accuracy of the group story and for making any necessary changes.

Instruments

The instruments for this study included the Demographic Questionnaire, embodied writing instructions, the meditative nature walk, the individual storytelling session, and the group storytelling session.

Demographic Questionnaire

Each woman completed a Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix D) at the onset of her participation in the study. This form gathered contact information as well as data about age, ethnicity, religious preference, relationship status, education level, and sexual orientation (the last of which was optional). It also asked for the dates and length of their A.T. thru-hike and the nature of their previous wilderness experience.

Embodied Writing Instructions

Each woman was instructed in how to engage in an exercise in embodied writing (Appendix F). A sample of embodied writing was provided as an example. Instructions to each participant for this activity were as follows:

Sit in a quiet and relaxed space where you will not be interrupted for 30 minutes. Begin by closing your eyes and focusing on your breathing for a while until you feel deeply relaxed. Allow your mind to return to your hiking experience on the A.T. Encourage it to show you those experiences vividly as a series of distinct

memories. Let your senses partake fully in each experience. Notice the colors, feel the temperature of the air, notice the sounds and smells, the textures of your surroundings and any tastes you might have experienced. Now focus on one specific occasion when you felt especially close to nature. Take some time to absorb all the sensual details. When it feels almost as if you are there again, gradually open your eyes and write about that experience, being careful to include all the sensual details that were present at that time.

This exercise was completed prior to participation in the meditative nature walk and the storytelling experience, and it was mailed to the researcher.

Meditative Nature Walk

A meditative nature walk in the forest immediately preceded each individual storytelling session. Participants were encouraged to remain open to the appearance of objects or processes that were reminiscent of her transformative experience. If the chosen object could be taken without harm to the environment, she was instructed to bring it along with her. After the walk was completed, the researcher's instructions were as follows:

Please hold the object you have chosen in your hand or in your awareness for a few moments. Close your eyes and consider the qualities that remind you of your own experience of transformation on the A.T. When you are ready, jot down your thoughts and draw any symbols or pictures related to this on the paper in front of you. Then we will take a few moments to discuss the experience before you begin your story.

Individual Storytelling Session

The individual storytelling session began with a broad question that was followed by additional probes (Appendix E). I first asked about anything the participant chose on her walk that was representative of her transformative experience. This question was intended to be a centering device. Each woman was then asked to tell the story of her transformative experience. After this story concluded, the researcher sometimes probed with follow-up questions those areas that were not included in the initial story. A final

question was added to learn about any fruits of transformation. The individual storytelling session was audio-taped and transcribed.

Group Storytelling Session

During the group storytelling session, the women were encouraged to identify a personal metaphor representing their journey. They were given the option of drawing a representative image of their own. Reproductions of Susan Dorf's original black and white drawings contained in R. Anderson's (1998a) *Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Growth and Divination* were also used to facilitate this process. The women were invited to select a drawing that was representative of their experience and to describe why it was chosen.

The women next listened to the researcher's version of the group story of transformation. They were invited to suggest changes and/or additions.

Treatment of Data

Prior to the presentation of the group story, all the data were incubated.

Incubating the Data

Prior to reviewing the women's stories and writing, I arranged to spend a weekend alone to engage in daily periods of meditative walking. I read each woman's transcribed story and embodied writing several times to identify particular segments or themes that resonated strongly with me. As themes emerged, I recorded them and compared them to my initial set of lenses or assumptions about the wilderness transformation experience. This process is the inward arc of Intuitive Inquiry, as described earlier in this chapter. When a story or embodied writing piece invited a

creative response, I drew a mandala. Each woman subsequently confirmed the accuracy of her individual story themes.

Directing my attention to the themes, I began to weave a preliminary group story of transformation. Intuition played an important role in the creation of the group story. It incorporated my intuitive response to the women's submitted artifacts, experiences recorded in my research journal, and insights that arose during my meditative walking experiences.

Validating the Data

A resonance panel of 2 non-participant women and the audiotape transcriber reviewed the individual storytelling segments describing transformation. The panel members were asked to read edited selections and note whether they experienced a feeling of resonance. The transcriber was also asked to describe her response to hearing the stories. The original plan was to look for areas of agreement between members of the panel for the material's inclusion. Ultimately, nothing was omitted, and the panel's written remarks are included verbatim in the Results chapter.

Presenting the Data

Participants' stories appear in the Results chapter of the study. In keeping with an Organic Inquiry approach, the stories remain in the women's own words, with some editing to prevent redundancy and to reduce length. Short biographical descriptions of each woman and samples of their embodied writing are included.

Transformation and wilderness themes emerged from the stories and writing. The themes, the stories, and my intuitive insights became the basis for the creation of a group story. The Researcher's Journal chapter portrays my response to hearing the women's

individual stories. Participants' artistic submissions and/or trail artifacts are contained in Appendix I.

Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 1: Clarifying the Research Topic

This topic announced itself in my ear as I was engaged in meditative walking in a forested place. There was no question that it was the right choice. I had always wanted to thru-hike the A.T., and wilderness had been an especially transformative place to me. Books about the trail had been favorite reading choices. I began exploring the topic of wilderness transformation by writing about my own experiences of transformation in wilderness. After about 2 weeks, I wrote my story again, expanding it with the addition of rich sensory details. Writing the researcher's story is a component of the organic research approach.

I spent considerable time walking meditatively each day. I also arranged to attend a 5-day shamanic retreat that encouraged daily interactions with nature. My awareness was purposely focused on the process of transformation during various interactions with nature. I was deeply drawn to several objects as I walked through a wooded area, including a dried gray fungus with a vortex of descending layers; a swirling, circular acorn top; and a climbing green shoot with opposing leaves. Themes of death and rebirth and the cyclic nature of existence became strong threads in the stories I was later to hear.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to women over the age of 21, though all were 27 or older when they completed their thru-hike. My intention was to explore a change in psychospiritual development elicited by prolonged exposure to wilderness that took place during the chronological period roughly identified as mid-life. There was nearly a 30 year

age spread between the youngest and oldest participant. The number of participants and variety of ages for women in the study make it impossible to draw conclusions about differences based on age.

Although the women self-selected as participants in the study based on matching the definition of transformation, no attempt was made to eliminate participants until the study's quota was filled. Thus it cannot be said that these participants were exemplars of the phenomenon. Participation became contingent on a willingness to fulfill the various components of the research study protocol. No one withdrew. They were all willing to complete the writing assignment and travel to the group meeting.

Many women expressed an interest even after the research quota was filled. Some had just finished the trail or were still in the process of walking. Without a comparison group of recent hikers, it is difficult to know if the change evolved over time or was apparent as soon as a person returns home. We have the recollections of hikers who completed the hike at least 1 year ago, and those of some from over a decade ago.

Recruitment took place using email addresses supplied by the Appalachian Trail Conference or using contact information obtained through response to advertising in hiking journals. This limited participation to those who had access to a computer and/or belonged to a hiking club. The women who responded were highly motivated to spend time and financial resources to participate in the study. There was no variation in the racial make-up of the participants. Nearly all had at least 4 years of college, and several had advanced degrees. It would be unreasonable to suggest that these results could be generalized to all long distance hikers.

The interviews were lengthy, sometimes taking nearly 2 hours to complete, and they generated powerful stories. The interview transcripts were subsequently edited to fit the requirements of a dissertation. The reader is thus dependent on the edited versions of stories to ascertain the full range of the women's experience.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter begins with a section on Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 2, which identifies the preliminary lenses of (or researcher's assumptions about) the study topic. This is followed by a section on Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 3, which focuses on the participants' data and their organization. Finally, there are sections on data analysis and the transformation impact of the research.

Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 2: Identifying Preliminary Lenses

A series of researcher assumptions about the experience of wilderness transformation were elaborated before the data collection process began. They were the result of an intuitive synthesis of my own wilderness experience, immersion in A.T. thru-hiker memoirs, and my preliminary explorations of the research literature. Meditative walking in nature helped me elaborate them. The lenses provided a starting point for engaging the study's findings and were subsequently modified as a result of the research. These Cycle 2 lenses or assumptions are listed below.

An experience of wilderness transformation seemed to have the following characteristics:

1. Becoming an embodied self, including reawakening from a numbed existence and experiencing an attunement of the self to the embrace of the Other. The senses are enlivened by exposure to wilderness in all its beauty and power.
2. Experiencing greater authenticity and truth including greater sensitivity to one's feelings as they conflict with the socially constructed self.
3. Revisiting emotional and spiritual wounds so that there may be an opportunity for healing.

4. Moving from a frozen and encapsulated self to one that is emerging and free.
5. Experiencing a sense of rebirth, from an individualistic self to one that is expansive and connected and a part of it all.
6. Eliciting feelings of profound love and gratitude.

Intuitive Inquiry, Cycle 3: Collecting Original Data and Preparing Reports

In this section, 12 female participants are introduced and their experiences unveiled from a variety of perspectives. The women's edited A.T. stories appear below in the same order in which the interviews occurred. The women chose their own pseudonyms. Included with each story are basic demographic information, a created or selected transformation image, the woman's verbal description of it, and a piece of embodied writing about her experience in nature.

The central research strategy in this study was storytelling, a process that implies an interaction between speaker and listener, writer and reader, in a co-construction of meaning. Through the written record of these stories, the reader is invited to share in the experience of wilderness transformation.

Embodied writing selections and the edited stories appear in the women's own words. Substantial editing was required to reduce the stories to an appropriate length. The emphasis in editing was on preserving transformative themes. Occasionally the editing process required that a word or phrase be added to clarify meaning. In such cases the added words appear in brackets.

Primary themes are identified from each woman's work, and they appear at the end of each collection of participant materials. These themes are also summarized at the

end of the chapter where they have been organized into seven major thematic areas. The significance of these themes is explored in the Discussion chapter.

Participant #1: Midnight

Midnight was 36 when she completed her thru-hike (1996) and 45 at the time of the interview. Her hike took less than 6 months. She designed it as a celebration of her renewed health after a battle with anorexia. Her recovery process began the transformation process that continued on the trail. She is co-founder/owner and director of a wilderness adventure business marketed to women and gives motivational speeches. She does not have a college degree. Previous wilderness experiences included backpacking trips taken 2 years prior to her A.T. thru-hike, some day hiking, and extensive trail maintenance work with her local hiking club. She is divorced and has no children.

Figure 1. Midnight's transformation image.



Midnight's Transformation Image

The images that most symbolize my hike and my life are obviously outdoor oriented but always involve the sun. The sun energizes me, makes me feel alive. During my hike on mornings that were difficult to get moving, the sun gave me fuel, the power to get up and walk. It would warm me on cold days, comfort me, and always made me feel alive. Its rays streaming through the trees felt like my stairway to the heavens. If I could climb them, I could get above the tops of the trees, pass by the highest mountains,

and remain high in the sky where everything is pure and serene. My transformation began before my thru-hike, and the hike completed it. Before the hike, I would stare out the window of the hospital and cry to be outside in the sun. Four walls prevented me from feeling its warmth or gaining its energy, its life. Standing atop Katahdin with the sun warming my body and feeling so alive, I knew my life had changed forever.

Midnight's Embodied Writing

It is 4:00 o'clock in the morning, and I am wide-awake. Not that I slept all that much last night. With each passing minute I can feel the adrenaline starting to build inside my body. I stare up at a clear sky filled with stars and the most beautiful full moon I have ever seen. Finally I can't stay in my sleeping bag any longer, and I emerge into the cold, crisp, October morning air. I am unable to focus on anything in the darkness, but I know "it's" here. I can feel its presence, and I can hear it calling me. I have seen it a million times in my mind over the last 6 months, and today is the day I will meet it face-to-face, Mt. Katahdin, the object of my desire. Today it is my mountain.

Today is the beginning of the end. The months of hiking through the endless days of rain and then dried by the warmth of the sun's rays; the days of being plagued by flying, biting, insects that were replaced by the soothing sounds of a whip-or-will and the wind through the trees at night; the laughter, camaraderie and at time the tears of my trail friends will soon be a memory. The pack that has hung on my back will be retired to the closet.

The anxiety of what direction my life will go after today is gone, at least for now. Today I will embrace the mountain on this final climb. I will savor its beauty and magnificence and fulfill my dream. How odd it will be to reach the summit and turn

around and retrace my steps. My mind is racing with anticipation; my body is tense and ready for action. But first I must wait for the first rays of the sun to show me the way to the mountain of my dreams.

Midnight's Story

Because of where I'm from, you just can't play forever. It dawned on me that because I'm the type of person that I am, a type A personality, I had always had my life structured. I never [used to think] that I actually had [talents and gifts]. I thought that I was put on this earth just to exist. I had no [self confidence] in my other life. I was a very submissive person. My ex-husband never did anything to encourage me. I ended up with an eating disorder.

My body has always been something of a . . . I guess I never respected it much. I was always basically physically fit. I was always very active and sports minded. I don't know if there was something along those lines with the eating disorder. The early transformation of rebuilding it from nothing to something that was healthy and able to walk 2,000 miles was just . . . very emotional for me. I still can't believe I did it. I should be dead. I re-lived difficult times in my life and replayed them and psychoanalyzed myself. You have so much time on your hands, and it's hot and you really want distraction so you go there. I cried a lot, and I let a lot of stuff out.

[It] was always a big landmark for me to cross into another state. I fell [at the border between New York and New Jersey.] The rocks were really, really wet, and I didn't hurt myself physically but psychologically it scarred me. The rest of that day I did 18 miles, and I [was] a mess. I just cried. I was tired. I was falling repeatedly. [My mother] over-nighted me, before I got back on the trail, this piece of *Bible* verse. It had to

do with angels watching over you. The next day I went out. It was raining. I came over to these rocks, and suddenly I just froze. I said, "I just can't do this anymore. I have to get off the trail." All of a sudden that little piece of verse came into my head, and I had this feeling. It was this warm, soft blanket around me. I don't want to explain it, but it was with me the rest of the hike.

My journal [was] about a lot of trepidation and fear going back to the other world. I felt so safe and secure on the trail and was afraid of losing the safety when I was out there. Even now when I feel like I need to be safe, I put on a pack and go hiking. I was willing to close my wounds or try to make them less deep. The trail really helped me to do that and helped me have closure with a lot of stuff, to let it go. It gave me the strength and the confidence to say, "You don't need that stuff any more. You need to let it go and close the wound." I was one of the few people that actually came back gaining weight. I gained four pounds when I was on the trail.

[After I returned home there were] things I had to sort out in my own mind, the clutter of the past life. Are you ready to let it go, or do you want to carry it with you? I started writing my book.

My confidence has changed. People that knew me before the trail and know me now think that aliens captured me and somebody else was brought down. "You're not the same person." And I said, "No I'm not, thankfully I'm not." Believe me I worked very hard to get to this place.

My relationship with other people is more assertive now. There was a time when I could sit in a room with someone that I had absolutely no interest in talking to and I would sit there because I thought that was the proper thing to do. I don't do that anymore.

I want to surround myself with people who bring substance to my life. My relationships with my family have certainly changed. I think they have a total respect for me.

I believe that God gave me a second chance in life and that was “Don’t screw it up. I’ve given you another chance.” There’s a destiny for you as everybody has, whether or not they want to choose it. It is their choice. I think that was what my lesson was. This is your gift and everything you’ve endured . . . there was a reason for it, to share it with other people, to give them their second chance or their first chance or whatever it is in life.

I feel a connection to the earth. That’s where I came from. I feel this connection to take care of it, to protect it, and [to] preserve it. This is where I am at peace. If I have a regret from before the hike, [it] is that I was not environmentally aware. Every day it just becomes more and more intense. When I see the stuff that goes on around me . . . people are just closing a blind eye and walking away from it. How can you do that? You’re destroying it. It’s not going to be there. You can’t pretend things aren’t happening. I wish I would have had this passion earlier because one person can move another person.

I live where I do because I still want to be part of [the A.T.] I can take that hike to the Post Office, let [hikers] stay in my house, or pitch their tent in my yard. I love that.

Midnight’s Primary Themes

Healing, letting go, gratitude, and commitment to service.

Participant #2: Heidi

Heidi is 54 years old. She thru-hiked the trail in 2001 at age 51 in 7 ½ months. She has a bachelor’s degree and has completed some graduate work. She is divorced, and she has grown children. Heidi worked as a seamstress of historic reproductions. Her first

backpacking experience took place shortly after her marriage in 1971. She subsequently hiked in Washington, Michigan, and Vermont and walked sections of the A.T. in Virginia almost every weekend with her husband and children. Heidi's teenage son completed a thru-hike of the A.T. a year before her walk and encouraged her to do so.

Figure 2. Heidi's transformation image.



[This figure was taken from *The Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Divination and Growth* and reprinted with permission (Anderson, 1998, p. 158). The artist is S. Dorf.]

Heidi's Transformation Image

The image I chose has two parts. In the lower half it looks like an opening or door with food, spirits, and dancing. Music is played by one of them. The inner being is happy, merry, dances in a party atmosphere. Above there is a peaceful scene with rolling hills. Grass grows, a tree provides shade, and the sun shines.

On the trail I learned to be at peace with all parts of me. As a child growing up with abuse of all kinds and as an adult in a marriage that failed, I learned to hide parts of me that wanted to be joyful, that wanted to dance, sing, party, etc. That door is opening. I have begun to do things that are fulfilling. The hike was the beginning. Above, where I step out into the open, the world is more peaceful. I can smell the flowers, rest in the shade of an oak. It is okay.

Heidi's Embodied Writing

It is getting dark as we cross Skyline Drive for the last time. So cold. I have to keep moving to get warm. The trees are frozen now and hanging way down, making them tough obstacles to push past. There is a layer of ice on the puddles that crunches under foot. The wind is bitter, cutting us like a knife. We are checking the miles left to the shelter--only 1.8 miles left to go. Will we be able to follow the trail in the dark? Papillion has the old style headlamp that uses up batteries fast. I have used mine very little. Only a tiny bit of battery life left making for a faint light. Neither is waterproof. We have a hard time locating the trail and even more difficulty following it. Papillion has lost his gloves. I have been wearing mine. They are actually glove liners, sopping wet but help somehow anyway.

There comes a time when you have to make the necessary stop. No problem for a guy, but it is a tremendous ordeal in the freezing cold rain for us ladies. As bad as you have to go, it is hard to make the body release, especially when the cold wind and rain hit bare skin. No sense in getting toilet paper out. Amazing how under conditions like this I would even think about it. A wet leaf would make me feel cleaner. I am wet anyway. I rejoin Papillion, but I have lost a lot of body heat. We know we are close to the shelter,

but it is so hard to tell if we are on the trail. Civilization has added dirt roads and extra trails along this corridor. I am shivering uncontrollably. We are trying to move fast, but the lack of visibility and trail conditions make it impossible.

We have finally arrived at the shelter. What a relief. For the last several hours my mind has been consumed with how I will proceed once I am in the shelter to get out of my wet clothes and into my sleeping bag. Now I am here and must do it. One more task is to get water so we can cook our long postponed dinner. Somehow I muster everything I have to drop my pack, get out my sleeping bag, disrobe, and crawl in. Now I will be alright.

Heidi's Story

I think everything you do, every person you meet, everywhere you go changes you some, but it's very difficult to always know how it has affected you. Hiking over 50 is a tremendous challenge. You hear them say that hiking the trail is a spiritual, physical, mental challenge and the hardest is the mental or the spiritual. The overwhelming thing if you finish the trail is that sense of accomplishment. Knowing that you can do that builds your self-esteem. If you can do this, the idea is you can do just about anything.

When I was coming of age and you're in those awkward teenage years, you do this comparison thing. It was worse then, and it gradually gets better, but I really think it got better on the trail--accepting myself, who I am. I've very fine hair, and I'm totally flat chested. I can look at other people. They're beautiful. They're strong, better endowed, and all those kinds of things. I've had long hair since I was a kid, and I don't want to cut it. It wasn't a problem. I just kept it in a braid. If it was thick, it would have been. Being flat chested is wonderful. People who have breasts, they're bouncing. They have to wear

support. My foot's real short. My feet are narrow. I was looking at them the other day. This is a perfect foot for hiking.

I hiked alone so you've got lots and lots of time to think. I'm one of 10 children, so I always had somebody around me. I never had a room to myself until I got divorced. This is the first time in my entire life I ever lived alone. To spend a lot of time by yourself . . . I enjoy the out-of-doors, but it is lonely. You have to deal with that and not just deal with it and be miserable. If you're going to hike the entire trail, you've got to come to some peace.

After miles and miles and miles go by, you reflect on your life and various things especially toward the end or maybe in the middle. The thing that came to me was that people can betray you, people can treat you badly, and people can be good to you. You can't really depend on the goodness and the kindness or the honesty of any individual person. The overriding thing that I came up with is that the trail is my friend. The trail is constant. The trail is there . . . not that the trail doesn't change. The trail isn't constant, but the trail is always there for you. It's always under your foot.

When I first got divorced or [was] in the process of that, it stunned me. He gave me papers to sign, and we hadn't discussed it. He said, "I've got something for you to read" and it was separation/divorce papers. Bang! Whoa! You got to be kidding. I've been married all my life. How do I survive? I don't know how to survive on my own. That was leading up to getting out on the trail. You're completely on your own. I had no backup support, no lifeline, and no advance preparation. I just got on the trail and started hiking, and it worked. It was fine. You're smart enough to figure things out for yourself as they go along. You trust yourself, trust the process, trust God, trust If you dwell

on the things that could happen to you (I might be so lonely, I might worry about this, I might worry about that, this might happen, that might happen), just cut through all that and just get out there and do it. You really learn to take each moment as it comes.

The trail is a very, very intense experience. Every day is packed with a lot. You know how much happens to you in a month, an entire month on the trail? You call home, and you talk to somebody, and it's like, "So what's happening back home?" "Oh not much. I went and got such and such and such, and it wasn't right, and I took it back, and blah, blah this, and blah, blah that." Everything's exactly the same; nothing changes. It's all the same back home. You're different, and everything stands still. You're having this immensely changing experience, and back here everything's the same.

People get caught up in all the stuff, like they've got to make so much money. Their lives just go with no control, with no stopping and enjoying it, doing this kind of stuff. Day after day after day after day you get in your car and you go to work and you-- psssseewww--and it's all routine. The next day's the same, and then you look at your life and what have you got? Stuff just doesn't get so important after [the trail]. Stuff is sort of a means to an end; it helps you accomplish what you want to do. I could get a real job and earn real money and do what normal people do. I don't know that I can. I just want to be free to go where I want to go and when I want to go. I'll live poor, but I don't want to be strapped to a job.

When I grew up I was shy. I was in a--some people overuse the word dysfunctional--a dysfunctional family. It was at best dysfunctional; at worst it was on the abusive end of dysfunctional. Because of that when I went to school I was very quiet and

also socially awkward. Life was a struggle. Every bit of my life was a struggle, and some of life has been hard to overcome.

The word I use when I think about hiking the trail is that it's an equalizer. It doesn't matter if you've had everything handed to you on a silver platter. It doesn't matter if you're rich or you're poor, you're a man or a woman, old or young. It's an equalizer. You're all doing the same trail. You're all dealing with the same mosquitoes, the same heat, the same rocks, the same everything. What makes a difference is your attitude and your ability to accept things as they are.

Each time I needed somebody in a different stage of my hike, there was somebody there--not immediately--but when I needed it the most. You will find a generous attitude amongst most hikers. [F]or the most part, you can connect very fast with hikers. Somebody you didn't know at all, in a couple of days you're sharing your deepest secrets. You might not ever see them again. That's part of it. It's easier to share your deepest secret with somebody you know you're never going to see anymore.

I saw a lot of people do creative things [during their trail experience]. I don't know that I can say that I did, but that's not to say that I won't. I have a creative part in me. I like taking pictures. I had a 35mm camera. You know I'd work and work a lot of times to take a picture to get it just the right angle. There are several other pictures that I really, really like. There's this one I took in the fog. I just love that picture. It was in the Smokies at sunrise.

I'm not an early riser. I would be a better hiker if I was an early riser. I'm in the Smokies, and it's really crowded. People are getting up, being very quiet, and I'm wondering what's going on because it really wasn't light yet. You look up, and it was one

of these really incredible experiences. You're aware that sunrise is happening. It's gorgeous, and everybody feels it is so sacred. Nobody is speaking. It was more than just we don't want to disturb the sleeping ones. It was more this is--it was awesome. People were waking up, and everybody was doing the same thing, grabbing their camera and quietly going out and getting a picture. One guy was up the chimney. It was a sacred moment. Then after the sun was up, everybody started moving and making breakfast.

Heidi's Primary Themes

Trust in the wilderness, appreciation of one's body, self-confidence, and peace.

Participant #3: Sirocco

Sirocco began her thru-hike in 2000 at age 42 and completed it in 8 months. She was 47 at the time of the interview. She has a graduate degree and works as an artist/grant writer/professional writer. Sirocco spent considerable time in wilderness areas before her thru-hike, including her first 3 years living in a log cabin in the woods. She also lived on a remote pond in Maine and in the White Mountains. Though she had been on countless day hikes and camp-outs in national/state parks and national forests, she had taken only one backpacking trip before her thru-hike. She has always read wilderness literature, is an amateur botanist and birder, studied plant taxonomy and botany, and has been a volunteer in prairie restoration. Sirocco is married and does not have children.

Sirocco's Transformation Image

[No photo available. The image is a narrow, glossy, white paper trail, perhaps 25 feet long, with splotches of green and an occasional drop of red. It stretches completely across the cottage floor where people are walking.]

. . . it goes on forever, green breath, parallel worlds, underlies everyday, rough and smooth, textured, underlying the constants--rhythm of breathing, walking, thinking undercurrent--the paradox of same-ness and different-ness. There are many ways to be on the same path. It's a portable trail! You can carry it within you.

Sirocco's Embodied Writing

It is mid-May in Virginia. We are walking the long level ridges south toward Pearisburg. Ahead of me Max's red pack bobs against the green. I smell the buttery odor of hay-scented ferns. My feet swing from rock to rock on the uneven trail. The air is mild. All around me is green, the bright fresh limey green of spring. In a couple of weeks, the green will become dense, sedate, plastic--the robust green of summer--but now I am breathing green. In and out. No filter. I think my blood is no longer red, but green, full of chlorophyll. And I am no longer afraid, anxious. Bring on the rain, cold, a heavy pack. I can handle it all.

This is not a spectacular part of the trail, spindly forest, somewhat monotonous, no big ups and downs. And I think no boundary. That is what this is. And I think back on the filters I wear in everyday life, my "ugliness blockers" I call them. I move on the earth with my eyes full of sand, the sand of ugliness. I feel at this moment--and I mean *feel*--in my body--how much of my energy is spent in blocking the visual ugliness of our world: the insensitive Wal-Mart, the needless housing tracts, the careless color. I feel how porous I am today. I suddenly think I am here for the beauty. I'm a hound for beauty--beauty of any kind. I remember something I read once. Death is the mother of beauty. I have known this all my life. I could die right here, and that would be fine. Done nothing. No Meaning. Just being here is enough.

At this moment and throughout the rest of our walk, I feel no need to make anything. I'm an artist. I make things constantly. I try to fix things, rearrange them, make beauty out of chaos, try to put the horrific imbalance I experience around me back en pointe. But here I see I don't need to make anything. It's already here, and I'm okay with that.

Sirocco's Story

I'm not a different person than I was when I started. I see my whole life as a transformative experience. The image I get is of a book laid down as if you're going to return to it, open up the page. The spine of the book is how I see the trail. I see it as mid-life. I was going up in my life. Hiking the trail became the spine of that book, and now I'm hiking down. I designed the trail as a ritual to reach that other side, and it actually did happen.

I hiked the trail with my oldest friend whom I met in eighth grade. On the trail I had to go through realizing that Amy was not my best friend. We visited two women on the trail, one whom Amy calls her best friend and someone she knew from childhood. Then we visited someone that I introduced her to in high school. I got locked out of the friendship the way so often these triads happen with girls, and actually they are best friends. Something that happened was seeing that there is no way you can make another person decide you're their best friend.

The mid-life hump was [something] that happened. I guess I thought I would write a book about the trail, some kind of midlife metaphorical thing. The trail itself is such an absurd thing. It's just this line, and it's this whole parallel universe that's happening. Why are we doing this? There are a lot of moments that are not transcendent

that you would have thought [would be] before you went. This lends itself very much to black comedy--this whole ridiculousness of tromping around out here filthy and eating horrible food and busting our butts going up these hills. Why? In some ways I felt like I could die on the trail, like that would have been perfectly fine. I find myself now going, "Uh huh, and now what?" It seems like [we] have to make up stuff to do in our lives.

People were extraordinarily kind to us. It made me think about karma and the good energy that's out there. There are people who live along the trail who have moved from California to live near the trail, and they don't even hike. It just has this aura, this attraction. I hate words like that, but it has this pull for people. When you're on it you're in this magic space, this very positive space. If there's a diner nearby, if there are hikers there, I always buy their lunch. I always do trail magic because that's what was done for us. The other transformative thing I've [recognized] is it was a real feat of physical mastery. To have done this tremendous physical feat felt pretty amazing, like I could do anything, hold up my end any where, and certainly would never have to justify my physical abilities to do anything ever again.

For about a year after the trail I was still aware of that green breath. I was always aware of a parallel existence, not even of other people, but of the earth breathing and chlorophyll and sky and weather and the passing of the seasons and pulsing. I was very aware of bird song and the air at all times. It seemed like I lived outside even though I was living inside. It seemed like my home was still outside. It was very much being a rhythm of the weather and the natural hours of the day and so forth.

When I first got off the trail I really was ready for a rest, a physical rest. I started writing my novel right away, writing it everyday. I did feel a lot more barriers had

dissolved for about a year. I started consulting. I was sick of working for other people. I wanted to have time to do my own artwork and [have] control over my own schedule. I think doing the thru-hike gave me the spine to be able to do that. I had a lot of fears. Maybe this won't work, maybe I won't ever work again, but it was just one foot after another today, tomorrow. I think the trail gave me a certain sort of spine to pursue things. I'd never had much faith in my ability to complete things or complete them well. And I'm not sure I do still, but I take the steps.

They say in physiology that they think there might be a part of the brain that is programmed to believe in God, and I think I'm deficient in that. The trail seemed more like another metaphor, another example. [It] had something to do with my own acceptance of all of that. I'm a person who tends toward depression. We don't go in there. We don't wallow in there. We don't pretend it's not there. We just keep going. That kind of acceptance I think has happened because of the trail. There were times on the trail when I would be thinking, "Now shouldn't this be ecstatic?" And it wasn't. It was just walking.

Sometimes I'd be very much paying attention to what was going on in my head. It would be just the most trivial stuff. It reminds me of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Suzuki writes about being in the monastery and having visitors come and tears falling from their eyes. He said when he left the monastery and then went back, he was struck just the way those strange people were. Maybe it's the same way on the trail. You're doing something extraordinary. You know it is extraordinary. With the passage of time or a return to the trail or looking at pictures, the extraordinariness of it becomes more manifest. When you're in it, it's just today.

[During the hike] I often wasn't happy with the way I was behaving to my friend or the things that I was thinking, not about Amy but just in general. How much I worried! Oh my gosh I worried. So I had to come face-to-face with that. I'm not naturally a very in-the-body person. I've always felt very comfortable in the woods. I'm also very aware of the animal nature of it. I would get anxious toward evening--which I think is a very natural animal response--when I would hear the hermit thrush in the evening that had a sort of menacing sound. I could also see how I projected my own psyche onto nature. Nature's completely neutral. We would discuss why does this part seem friendly and why is this part not. I just think it was another big step toward being in my self, being who I am.

I feel more connected to myself [since the experience]. I feel more connected to the earth, to the natural cycle of things. On a one-to-one basis I felt a lot of . . . people did amazing things for us and to us that we didn't even ask for. People were incredibly generous, [but] I feel less connected to people in general. Most of the time, I look around me and think, "What the hell are we doing. Are we insane?" I'm not optimistic about the future, but I think the earth is fine. The earth is going to be the earth.

What matters to me now are my relationships to my friends, to my husband. What matters to me is the artwork that I do. What matters to me is this personal journey. What matters to me is the earth. I work with mostly environmental groups as a grant writer. A lot of the things that matter to me I see not valued in the culture. I try to be effective in what I can be, not take on things that I can't undertake. When I was younger like a lot of younger people I had much bigger . . . I had a scare a couple of months ago, a mammogram that wasn't normal. It turned out that it probably is normal. It made me

think what would happen if I only had a year. To my surprise, if I was in decent health, I just wanted to finish what I'd started which is to finish my novel.

I learned I have a lot of talents and gifts. I have more physical talent than I thought, more than I was ever led to believe. I come from a family of athletes, and I was always the one that couldn't do anything. Prior to the trail, I was executive director of an artist community that mainly had writers. I'm a better visual artist than I am a writer. My writer self came back [after] being around writers all the time. They always say about creativity that you gather information, then you let it sit, and then you make the thing. I think that the trail was the sitting part. I think it pulled the writing back and [gave me] a story to tell. I told myself [that] story on the trail.

I've come to know in a deep way that life has no meaning. [In my novel,] *Avis and Mavis*, the combination of the prologue and the suicide are what I have to say. Who has faith? What is faith? Guyot, the character that's down below walking is God. He's sort of like Godot. He is an amoral person. Perhaps God is just our own inner voices projected outward, which could account for various definitions of God from the father to the Jewish idea of just being a light. The light is within us, and we're just trying to reach toward a bigger light that is all around.

My father did not think I would be able to do this. He never thinks I can do anything. He never expresses it. He doesn't often express it to me, but I know. Part of the book ended up exploring [various philosophical ideas]. What is a father to a daughter? What is a God as a father? What are fathers? Why do girls need them? I really went into it with my father. What's the point of thinking your kid can't do anything? On the other hand, my father met us 800 miles into the trail. I told him we were going to be at Fontana

Dam at 3:00 o'clock. We walked out of the woods at 3:00 o'clock, and my father was crying. When I told my dad I was writing a novel he said, "Oh, I know hundreds of people with a novel in their drawer."

Since the trail I am much more in the environmental world professionally. I have become somewhat disillusioned with the arts world. I had been an exhibiting visual artist. I got this job as this executive director, and I couldn't . . . my creative life just came to a halt. While I was there, I started doing this very weird project. I had this 28" paper doll with no face. I think while I was on the trail, too, I thought a lot about that paper doll, and I realized that it really is a powerful piece. I want to do a paper doll outfit, a persona about the trail, but the right one hasn't come up yet. I'm very taken with the maps that go up and down, the profile, and I've wanted to get a complete profile of the trail. That profile, it's like an umbilical cord that goes up and down, up and down, and also like a heart beat.

My father's a consultant. When my own father said in response to my first consulting work, "Now you do what? You do what?" There can only be one consultant in the world, and that is my father. There's no room for anyone else. That's part of what this journey was about. I think this trip was about building a new inner-father.

Sirocco's Primary Themes

Clarity of vision, identification with nature, courage, and creativity.

Participant #4: CicelyB

CicelyB completed her thru-hike in 2000 at age 51. She was 57 years old at the time of the interview and had completed a second major thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail. Her A.T. thru-hike took her a little less than 6 months. She has a graduate degree

and is currently employed as a real estate broker. Before the A.T., her wilderness experiences included lots of backpacking, [plus] serving as an expedition leader with the Boy Scouts at Camp Philmont and as a trip leader in the Sierras. She is married and the mother of a grown son. CicelyB was not sure that her thru-hike was transformative, although she certainly felt changed in several ways.

Figure 3. CicelyB's transformation image.



[This figure was taken from *The Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Divination and Growth* and reprinted with permission (Anderson, 1998, p. 70). The artist is S. Dorf.]

CicelyB's Transformation Image

...a complex pig, bluntly wandering forward, but with turmoil/movement inside. This is more or less what I feel I appear to be. I'm not sure if I was or wasn't transformed. Transformation means change. Was it change or solidifying what I already was? This solid image with internal turmoil might be me. To finish the A.T., you need to be a strong creature, but complex inside. If that movement/adaptation/change isn't heeded, there can be no hike or a life completion that's satisfying.

CecilyB's Embodied Writing

I awake with the thought that the only possible good part of this wet, cold day is the hope that I will be finally done with the Smokies. I feel cold and tired and so old one day before my 52nd birthday. For days I have been slugging through spring snow trying to enjoy the first flowers of the season: The bloodroot, spring beauties, and other flowers fade in importance as each hiker zooms past me leaving me feeling that my speed will never match anyone else's on the trail. I have always had goals for distance, and while I knew I probably couldn't do it, I had been hoping I could make it to the spot my younger travelers are headed for. At the end of a long downhill of many thousands of feet, a road will lead to Mountain Mommas and the possibility of a warm, dry bed and a tasty hamburger. As the day progresses, my knees scream that the "6:00 p.m. grill is closed" deadline will not be met.

Through mud and mist I stagger ever downward, feeling quite sorry for myself. My mood sinks a notch as each hiker speeds past me with a cheery "See you at Mountain Mommas" greeting. Now it is late afternoon. Sore and tired, I shuffle downward with my knees aching with each jarring step. Planting my poles solidly to erase the pain, head down against the ever-present drizzle of rain, I am making progress. A pole plant--I stop and look in amazement. Two inches from the muddy tip is a morel mushroom. I gasp, reach down and pluck the delicious treat. I look about me. I have totally missed it. I have been out of the fragrant Balsam Firs that have been my companions for days and have descended into hardwoods that morels love! Two more steps, another mushroom, six more steps, two more mushrooms. A smile steals across my face. I am looking about

some more and a big grin erupts as I realize I can also see Davenport Gap Shelter through the trees, within 200 yards of me.

Pain is gone! I hustle down to the shelter and share my excitement with two couples there. Three of the hikers are looking at me as if I'm crazy, but the fourth shares my enthusiasm since he's seen them cooked on Emeril Live. I dump my pack, and we walk around the shelter, quickly picking several dozen of the three to six inch mushrooms. I yogi butter [to "yogi" something is to beg for it from a passing person just as Yogi Bear would do with the tourists in Yellowstone] and start frying them a few at a time in my tiny 4 inch pot lid. Into the pot they go with instant chicken soup and rice. The pain, the cold, the rain--all are gone, so happy. The trail is beautiful again.

CecilyB's Story

Certainly the beginning of the trail is very physically hard because I [was] not in shape. Working out at the Y three times of the week didn't do it. Things hurt. It's cold. The middle of the trail was probably very enjoyable because I got in condition. Then you get close to the end. While you think you can do [this] forever, the body is starting to wear out. There were sections toward the end that were probably the most physically challenging with granite rocks and being fearful of how to get up or down someplace. There were times where I'd [be] hanging by two feet and one hand, going "Where do I put the next thing?" They were kind of scary. When I would overcome these, I felt so good about it. At the end, I totally disregarded the shelters. The last 3 weeks [it] was "Can I do this with my broken foot?" I'd walk from sunup to sundown and then just sort of plop, but I was very at peace with myself. I wasn't really upset, maybe because I was so exhausted.

I took time to appreciate the views and nature. The weather cooperated, so it was helpful to feel that way. What I also enjoyed was the intrusion of something. I'd be walking along in my thoughts, and I'd suddenly hear a bird. That just really hit me. Or I'd come up to a view, a vista point that just would take my breath away. I've been walking for 5 hours through just nothing but green, green, green, green, and then I would literally stop and say, "This is why I'm here." I enjoyed trying to figure out what I was walking through. I was always asking people the names of plants, trees, and trying to notice dry sides, wet sides of mountains. I really appreciated that. I kept a journal. To go back and read that journal, each day is so vivid, not every moment, but you remember it. I think of this other life. What were you doing 4 weeks ago, 4 months ago? Everything was so vivid. You read about what you did. You remember that stream, hill, turkey, grouse, animal.

When I first got home, [I had] been living in this very small backpack for 6 months, realizing that was really all [I] needed. I live in a very big house with a walk-in attic, [am] married to a pack rat, have lots of stuff--comfortably middle/upper middle class--so accumulated. I got into a frenzy of "Why do I have all this crap?" I really got into an anti-thing thing, threw tons of stuff away because I guess I got the feeling that these things around me are not important. What's important are experiences, remembrances, things I have done that are now a part of me. [It] is what I value more than this.

I've never been one who needed lots of people. I've never had tons of friends. I'm not a real social person. It doesn't bother me to not be doing things with people, and I think it's probably even more after this trip. I'm perfectly attuned to just taking a walk by

myself. I didn't have any great inner conflicts or problems with career, family. I did this hike at a time when my son was in college, and I guess he's basically gone off on his own.

Things have lost importance in terms of speed of getting things done. I'd always been a very easy going, what happens, happens kind of person. That was exacerbated after my hike. Things used to eat at me a little. I was trying to change things that can't be changed. After you're a hiker, you get into "If it's meant to be, it's meant to be." I think I'm in better physical shape even years after the hike than I was before. I get out, and I walk more. I try to make time. I do some hiking with the Sierra Club. Taking time to be outside definitely has increased after the hike, whether it's just a walk, mushrooming, hiking. I've realized that it's important. I didn't do [the thru-hike] with a "Oh, I'm sure I won't" [attitude]. It was an "I'm just going to take each day" [attitude]. That's the way I did my whole hike.

I don't know that I knew I was going to make it until I saw that sign. When I saw it--and I'm not going to cry now--but I just burst out crying and I walked up sobbing. People looked at me [like] "This is a weird lady." It was the realization that I did this. It's emotional; it was happiness; it was "I don't believe this." Here I am at 52 years old, leaving suburbia. I'm just shocked that I did it. I just love the feeling that it gives me when I'm out in the woods. You always feel at peace with yourself. You always--even if you're hot or struggling or huffing and puffing--it's just such a good feeling. It's just you know you're alive. It was the experience of going out and being on my own, being responsible for myself, and seeing more of beautiful America which is why I chose another trail.

What matters to me now is a blend, taking time for myself. I take care of myself and am relatively healthy for my age. I also come from a family that doesn't seem to live very long, so genetically it's sort of a crapshoot. Make hay while I'm doing things. I'm taking a trip in the fall with my sister. We were sort of grousing about should we do this or that. She said, "Remember the parents." [I thought to myself], "You're right. Spend it today." I try to take some time to do a little sharing of myself with the world. I've done some backpacking seminars. I've done some Habitat work. I do a blend in my life. My husband and I are both independent contractors, so we pay our own medical insurance, our own social security. Financial stability has to be a big concern, which is unfortunate. If I had no financial worries, I would probably quit work and be walking tomorrow. I'd just become a gypsy and take off on all these trails. Just seeing a view or hearing a bird is just--[it] can be the highlight of day--so much more than closing the deal, finding the perfect dress, the mundane, worldly things. There are things in nature that can give you so much pleasure. Life is short; just enjoy it.

CecilyB's Primary Themes

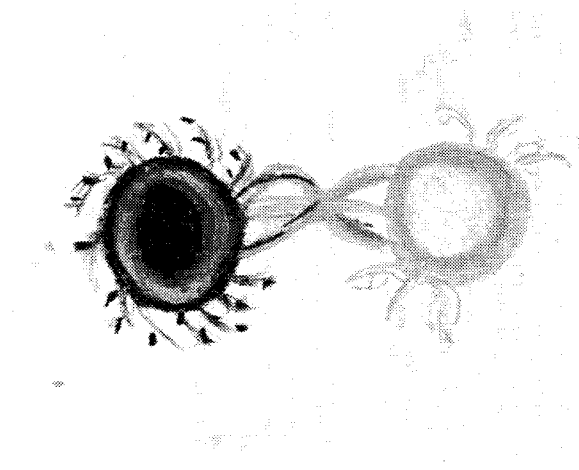
Appreciation of beauty, acceptance, perserverance, and feeling alive.

Participant #5: Sisu

Sisu thru-hiked the trail in 2000 at age 27 with her husband. She is the youngest of the participants and 1 of 2 who hiked the trail with her spouse/partner. She was 32 at the time of the interview. It took her approximately 7 months to complete her hike. The weather deteriorated badly in Maine by late October, forcing her to stop short of her goal. Sisu completed the last 60 miles of her thru-hike in 2001. She has an associates degree and is employed as an early childhood teacher. Previous wilderness experiences include

canoe trips and weekend backpacking. Her “shake-down” trip for the hike was a 10-day backpack on Isle Royal. Since completing the A.T., Sisu and her husband went on to hike the Pacific Crest Trail. The couple is expecting their first child.

Figure 4. Sisu’s transformation image.



Sisu’s Transformation Image

On the left is someone with pain and suffering, hurt, fear, shame, loss. The roundness represents the motion that is life. No matter what pain is already there, you have to keep moving. The center connects the left and the right. The colored veins hold the two selves together. There is dark pain, but the rays of hope have also come in. There is light on the right. The hope is now seen, finding the person deep inside. The hurt is still connected on the left, but hope and inspiration have made an impact. You’ve taken on more of these.

Sisu’s Embodied Writing

I have been walking by myself lately. Guess we all need that--time to be in our heads to think and daydream. I’ve been very lucky to have time to just think about whatever. It’s been about 3 months of walking, eating, and living on the A.T.

Today is an almost perfect summer day in June--slight breeze, sun shining, and a light heart. As I am walking to the top of the hill, I hear something. Something feels amiss. Now I see a black bear cub. And the first thing I am thinking is, "Oh, there's a cub." Not a reaction of fright or fear, but just a reaction that I know it is here and I am here. Now I stop and look at the bear with curious eyes, wanting to know what is up. The next thing I hear is the huffing and puffing of another young cub trying to catch up to its sibling. The cubs don't see me yet, but I am beginning to wonder where the mother is. Now I hear her--crash, stomp, branches breaking--and the mother emerges from the thick woods, stopping right on the trail. She is quickly making movements that make the cubs go straight up the tree. It's right next to the trail.

Boy is she a beautiful creature! Brownish black and larger than the last bear I saw. She is standing up on her back paws and making herself even larger by raising her front paws high into the air. I am amazed that she has not made a sound. Instead she is smelling the air strongly. I can smell her, too. She smells like wet fur, but with lots of earthy smells like dirt and leaves. I see her nostrils flaring out so she can smell even deeper.

My mind is back to real time, and I realize I still need to do something because the bears are where I need to be. I just slowly back up and am waiting. They are not moving, but her cubs have begun crying, sounding almost like a human child. And I wait. "Alright sister," I'm thinking. "I have to be where you are." I decide to move closer, but this time I click my hiking sticks together and start to talk to her. I am letting her know that I just need to pass by, and I don't want to disturb her. Again, I back up slowly and proceed to wait again. I am running out of ideas, but I figure I can wait longer if this bear

really needs the time. What am I in a hurry for? It feels like hours though I am sure it is only a few minutes. The mother bear is now slowly letting her cubs climb down and head off into the weeds. She is following behind, but has turned back twice to make sure I am still waiting. I realize I am no longer a creature that only visits the woods, but this is my home just as it is the bear's. And from their reactions, I think they know I belong here, too.

Sisu's Story

When I first think of the Appalachian Trail, it's a strange thing, but I have intensity in my stomach. All of my A.T. experiences were not necessarily very positive and profound in a joyous, cleansing way. It was very painful for me--a lot of the experiences. Starting out on the A.T., I obviously had different expectations than what ended up happening. I wanted to go out there because I was a part of this couple. I am going out there because I am the wife of Raroo. I will go with him wherever he wants to go.

I come from and was raised in a very religious family, the Protestant Evangelical Church where we attended church every Sunday. I brought my *Bible* with me. I just wasn't making that connection that I'm at peace with God and nature and this is beautiful. I didn't participate in a lot of the activities that [the other hikers] did because I was very religiously stout about things. Smoking pot, drinking--those weren't a part of my life. Yet [those things] were profoundly changing their nature experience. I wasn't experiencing that with them, so I was separate from it. I've always been with people whether I chose it or not. It was like I needed to come to the point where I was choosing this path. I'd done all these miles, why shouldn't I be proud of myself? Why shouldn't I

be proud of the accomplishments that I've done? Yet all these other little doubts and things kept coming in my mind like "You really probably aren't cut out for this because you're not even like the other thru-hikers." I was outside their circle.

[From the very beginning of the hike, there had been challenges.] So you're afraid of water crossings? We're going to give you water crossings. So you're afraid of above tree line? We're going to give you above tree line with sleet, rain. It won't stop, and you won't get views. I had blister problems probably for over 1,000 miles and really bad. Your whole foot is just torn apart. [I thought,] "These adverse circumstances are happening because of some sin that you have done in your life." Harboring the bad feelings that I got in my heart just kept growing and growing. I felt horrible about it. Here I am supposed to be having a life changing, beautiful, at one with nature experience, and I feel like I'm just dying.

I felt I was losing the connection with the person that I've devoted my life to, my husband. I started breaking down. Another hiker happened to be going southbound that day. She had really bad knee problems, and she decided to go up Moosilauke instead of down. She looked at me and said, "Sisu, are you okay?" And I answered, "No, I'm not." At that point, I'd never admitted to anybody I wasn't okay. To me the physical wasn't that big a deal. Emotionally it was extremely heart breaking, having to deal with who I am, where I was going, trying to figure it out, and not getting any peace or time to think about it.

My [husband had] separated himself emotionally [from me]. It was so hurtful, but I understand his point of view, being so frustrated with having a companion that wasn't happy. I didn't see that at the time. I saw him as being such a brute. [The weather turned

very bad.] I was at a crossroads. I had to choose to follow him, possibly risk my life and his because what if something happened and I couldn't get him out. I chose not to go. I chose at that point to make a different decision. That was my first decision maybe as an adult that was mine. It was my decision to say "I can't do that." And it's okay to say no.

This wasn't really what I expected. Slowly I was letting some parts of me just let go, let go of those circumstances and just say "I can't do a lot of these things any more." I met some beautiful people that were giving so much to me, a total stranger. Being in your deepest physical need and the emotional need along with it, giving and feeding me physically and at the same time feeding my emotional need, they were accepting me. They didn't care what else I'd done in my life. I was here and needed to be fed. So eat and be filled. I was slowly accepting that generosity from others.

Who would have thought that this Midwest gal who'd never hitchhiked in her life would ask all these people. I got pretty good at asking for rides. I just started walking south, and I felt so free. [Finally deciding to take my own path] was the best decision I'd made. All of a sudden the woods looked so cool. I thought it was the most fantastic place that I was in. It was as if something was released from my eyes. I took the days to finish the stretch on the Hundred Mile Wilderness [without my husband] and had glorious weather. I enjoyed myself extremely. I felt that I had made a connection with nature and gotten time and solitude to think. I finally made peace with [Mt.] Katadhin. I needed to make peace with myself and to heal hurt feelings with myself, with my husband, and with the mountain. I had a class 1 gorgeous day. I did it without fear, and I was so excited.

The things that matter to me now are the love of my family and accepting that I need food, shelter, water, and if I've got love, that's all I need. I didn't perceive that

before. I'm glad that I realized that life can be so simple if I allow it to be. It can be complex if I create the complexity. I even did that on my thru-hike. I created a lot of things in my own mind that I didn't have to. I look at people differently [today].

Sometimes it's scary because I don't want to see what I see. I'll go through the store, and I'll see certain people, and my heart breaks. When I feel a need to react, I need to be sensitive. I think that is what nature has given me. It's that gift to sense now. Everything around me is more profound. I work with preschool kids, so I have to read them quickly to decipher what I'm going to do. I'm realizing that that's a gift, too. I've not accepted that sometimes because it's not highly esteemed in our society. I enjoy doing it, and I'm good at it.

Deeply knowing the lay of the land and experiencing that has changed me. I was not used to sleeping outdoors multiple nights in a row. Unless you do that you don't realize the connection. I would walk along and know this place is it--the deepest sleep I would have. I had to thank the spot because it chose me. I feel responsible for a lot of things now. I'm responsible for the land that I live on, the things that I use. I'm more conscious of that. I wasn't conscious of that before. I need to give my heart and love to things I feel passionately about whether it's bringing some recycling in for somebody because they didn't even think about it, riding my bike to work, [or] giving time to open the door for some lady and being aware of that.

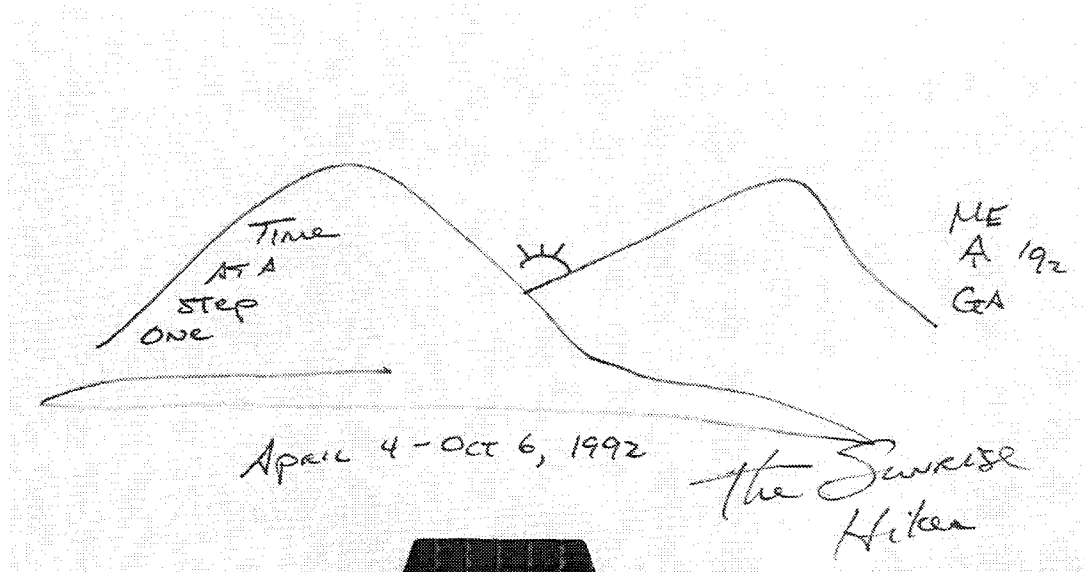
Sisu's Primary Themes

Letting go, finding oneself, independence, and gratitude.

Participant #6: Jamie

Jamie thru-hiked the A.T. in 1992 at age 35, completing the hike in “6 months, 2 days.” She was 47 at the time of the interview. Currently employed as a computer programmer/teacher, she has changed careers in the last few years. Her graduate degree is in industrial engineering. Jamie described herself as a frequent hiker, backpacker, and canoe camper. Before her thru-hike, she participated in and led many outdoor trips and has worked as a wilderness guide. She is single and has no children.

Figure 5. Jamie’s transformation image.



Jamie’s Transformation Image

I drew this image in all the trail registers along the A.T. The mountains are the way things should be, my expectations of life. The sun represents me, rising up beyond those expectations into my own day. Before the trail, I was a person who preferred to stay up at night and sleep-in in the morning. The trail showed me that I love the day and that the rising sun brings such wonderful opportunities with it. Morning is my favorite

time now. This all corresponds to doing what I love and enjoying each day for what it has to offer.

If I redrew the image today, I would draw the sun much larger. I, as the sun, have risen above the mountains more than the image shows. The "one step at a time" represents learning how to deal with overwhelming tasks [by] breaking them down into smaller manageable pieces. It is also how to find joy in life. Patience is a gift. Being patient helps me to listen to my heart. "GA to ME" and the date represent reaching out beyond what life has planned, setting a goal, and achieving it.

Jamie's Embodied Writing

I walk in soggy boots all day, my socks becoming sponges. The rain and thunder come and go, but I don't mind. All is well in the world. I don't even mind when another rainstorm interrupts my evening meal, putting it on hold temporarily as I wait out the current cloudburst. Here I am on the Appalachian Trail, a dream brought to reality. Even with wet boots and all, life is good. I am strong. I am special. I am on the A.T.

I settle into my trusty down sleeping bag that has just been reunited with me at the last post office stop after my synthetic bag hasn't kept me warm for the first 14 days. How warm and cozy I feel in my "home" away from home. My toes, cold and damp all day, are warm and comfortable. The dampness in the air is heavy. I can see it weighing down my tent. I can feel it hanging in the air.

The 1812 Overture begins with one boom after another. The light show is like sitting in a dark room with strobe lights on all sides. I close my eyes to block out the light. I cover my ears to minimize the impact. It will end soon, I think. But it continues. I hide my head inside my sleeping bag because it is too bright and too loud. But yet I can

still see the light and hear the booms. The storm is so close that I can't even count "one-one thousand" before the next boom. This isn't safe. I am lying on the ground with a short pad, only from my shoulder to my knees, under me. I curl up my whole body on this pad, my only protection in case the lightening strikes the ground. This is most uncomfortable, definitely not at all safe. It will end soon. I am a small, insignificant part of the world compared to the 1812 Overture. I will never be the same.

Jamie's Story

I was the fourth of five kids. The plan [was] to go to college and get a good job, and it wouldn't be in the artsy world. It would be in the math/science world. Before I went on the trail, [my father] was concerned about work. He was concerned about work the whole time. When I [would] tell him, "I think I want to be a school bus driver," dad of old would have [said], "Oh my God, you can't. You have this education. You have a master's degree. You can't go drive a school bus."

I lived with a guy for a while. When I split up with him, it dawned on me [that] unless I did something for myself, if I was waiting to meet somebody who did what I enjoyed doing, I was a fool. I need to do something for myself. I can remember on one trip (it was actually a canoe trip), it was raining. We were walking a trail just to give us something to do. I can remember talking with this woman, and she said that the Appalachian Trail was a dream of hers. All of a sudden it dawned on me that unless I did something about it, it was never going to happen.

I think what the trail [gave me] was a profound ability to learn to listen to myself. I thought the trail was supposed to be about living in the wilderness, and it actually turned out to be more about my sexual orientation. I thought I was going to go out and

live in the woods and hike from Georgia to Maine. I did, but what the powers to be gave me on the trail was another woman. She was a lesbian who was totally comfortable with her self. I was a lesbian in denial, not at all comfortable with it and not knowing I could accept it, not knowing that it was perfectly fine. I was given a person and lots of time on our hands for me to ask questions and her to tell me about her life and the lesbian community. What a gift to figure that out!

[One] reason I love nature is I can be who I am versus “Let’s put on high heels and makeup and talk about margarine” or whatever it is people like to talk about. I can come out here and be who I want to be. If I want to be somewhat tomboyish, I can. If I want to be gentle, I can. I think the out of doors levels the playing field whether you’re a man or a woman. When you come out here, you have the same four basic needs: shelter, food, water, and warmth.

[The trail] helped ground me in my life. It helped get my life on a path that was more about me versus the “shoulds.” One of the hardest things was quitting my job because I wasn’t brought up to do that. My father reminded me of that several times, but in quitting my job and doing something that I wanted to do, it taught me that I can make those hard decisions. It taught me that I could listen to my heart, and that is the hardest thing. It also taught me that money is not the most important thing. I took a job that was a 33% pay cut and loved it, did it for 9 years. Learning that I can make the decision for the trail helped me to make this decision. It seems like 6 months is a big chunk of time to take out of your life until it’s over. Then when you do it and you’re done, you realize it went by so quickly. It makes me realize that another 6 months can go by quickly, too. If

you don't do something you enjoy, the 6 months will be done. You'll look back and say, "What did I do with my time?"

What I like about nature, gardening, and being outdoors is the time to think. Everything becomes so much clearer. Some people listened to music [on the trail], but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to hear what was around me. I wanted to hear the birds. I wanted to hear the sounds. Prior to doing the trail, if I had to walk in darkness, it would be very uncomfortable. Now it doesn't bother me at all. I barely use a flashlight on a trip anymore. I don't feel the big world is around me, and it's all dark, and I don't know what's out there. Now I'm part of it. When I take people [out] on snowshoes, I'll ask them to turn off their flashlights so they can experience it. It is 13 years later, and my thru-hike still affects me. I was out in California at my sister's house doing something outside. She lives in a very quiet spot, and I heard sounds that took me back to the trail. A lot of feeling will come back, a lot of contentment--peace and quiet--and just feeling good in my heart. I love the fact that I'm not in control of it, that it does its own thing. I can put a seed in the ground and a ton of mulch on top of it. You think, "No way can anything happen to this seed." You look one day and here comes the pea plants coming up. It's amazing.

Trying to have my life be directed by what I enjoy doing versus being directed by the fact that I need a bigger house, none of that is important to me. I like the physical feeling that [hiking] gives me because it makes my body feel like it's being used. I have a big thing about reusing things, plastic bags, Ziplock bags. I hate it when people throw away a perfectly good Ziplock bag because where is it going to go? I think I'm one of the

unique people that see it leaving the hand and going into the trashcan. What we're doing to the earth is . . . I don't know where all the garbage goes.

I think I have been able to motivate others by sharing my story and encouraging others to do something that they've dreamed about. There have been times when I've shown [my slideshow,] and people have come up to me afterwards. "You've just encouraged me to do something that I've been thinking about or that I could do." And especially a female doing it. Women don't always have a role model. Another talent is sharing the outdoors. For the last 9 years I've been guiding on a part-time basis. I take people out, and some people are afraid. I especially like doing the women's trips. I've forgotten the details [of my hike,] but the feeling is still there, the feeling of camaraderie. Being [in] a wandering community is a powerful feeling. For somebody who is not outgoing, it's an awesome transformation.

Jamie's Primary Themes

Real-ization, balance, contentment, and listening to your heart.

Participant #7: Cadence

Cadence was 38 years old when she completed her thru-hike in 2003. At the time of the interview she was 40. Her hike took 4 ½ months. Cadence has a graduate degree and is employed as an occupational therapist. She is single. Her previous wilderness experiences were quite extensive, including an experience with Outward Bound, a 4-month hiking trip in the British Isles, and 3 ½ months of outdoor mountaineering.

Cadence's Transformation Image

[No photo available.] Somewhere I have seen a poster in Canada of a large tree with the caption "Carmanah." It is a huge tree somewhere in a forest in British Columbia,

a large old growth pine tree shown at the base of its trunk angling upwards. The tree is solid and strong, weathered and wise. It represents how I've begun to feel as a result of my thru-hike. I feel stronger. I feel anchored. I feel clearer in myself--content to stand alone. A little weathered--definitely more worn--yet peaceful, content, and okay amidst everything [going on] around me. I see the base of the trunk. The branches and leaves are not yet visible--that too fits. The rooted-ness I feel is the transformation. The rest of the growth is not clear, not yet visible, yet surely there. I'm okay with that part. I'm trusting. I don't need to see or know. I trust the rest will fit.

Cadence's Embodied Writing

I am walking along through the Smoky Mountains on one very fine morning. I feel peaceful, relaxed, and purposeful. I awaken to a very full hut of wet, tired hikers this morning--their spirits dampened by the continuing rain. Today I feel peaceful--excited by the beautiful misty scenery around me, the damp heavy vegetation, and the possibility of seeing animals. I am hiking with a person from Canada. We are planning on hiking into Hot Springs to get supplies and get cleaned up. As we began this morning, the weather was changing from the usual drizzle to a downpour. Now it is changing to hail and finally heavy snow. I hike on, noticing the wet, lush greenness that is growing all around--signs of spring in the Smokies. Passing another hut, I notice it is full of sleepy hikers, beginning to stir and looking out at another day of rain and snow. I laugh and stretch my stride into one of a classic, cross-country skier, pretending to ski by and exchanging a few grins with the stirring hikers.

I feel happy and comfortable with the weather and its varied changes. I feel strong. As I hike along, I continue to feel happy, comfortable, and at peace. I hike down a

long, downhill stretch and completely enjoy myself hiking along, noticing my surroundings. I gradually feel aware of a kind of felt presence--a spiritual presence--and a sort of knowing--conveying that I will be completing my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail this year. It is hard to describe, but I talk about it when I meet up with a fellow hiker. I feel content, at peace, and both comfortable and confident in my desire, dream, and commitment to be out hiking this year.

Cadence's Story

It's hard to summarize I guess, just really rich to spend so much time outdoors with no agenda other than walking from A to B. I was sort of drawn to it because of the meditation in motion, to just have a chance in life to be present with whatever happens. Because it's such a long period of time, there are a lot of changes. I've done some meditation retreats--they've always been sitting retreats--and there's a lot of talk about whether or not you should be moving. Moving and being active is nice for me. It means you can change the scenery and let the outside influence you. I can find that particularly helpful--the outdoors. I knew when I started meditation--at some point, that's probably when I started concretizing the idea of hiking the A.T. I was at Kripalu in the Berkshires for a number of months. That's exactly when I heard of the A.T. first and that's also when I started meditation. That's when it all started forming--the idea.

I recall in my very first day or two of hiking, I came across a group of women on a day hike--middle aged--and they're very curious to see a woman hiking alone with the idea of hiking the whole trail. I don't know the reason for the grouping, but they were asking questions about whether this was a spiritual hike. "Is it . . . are you trying to connect with God?" And I could feel my back just tense, and I said, "No, of course not!"

It was sort of my gut response. I thought about that later as I hiked over the months and ever since. How can it not be? At the time my exposure to religion was--well, that's when you go inside a building of a particular faith. That's not fit me well for lots of different reasons and experiences. I've always felt more connected to the outdoors and nature, sort of a life cycle in the outdoors.

In some ways the walk for me was like a coming home, being able to actually experience that because I think of times in my life that have just been unbearable. It's always been nature that's grounded me and made sense of things again. So whether it was when my Mom passed away--that was the year I graduated university and I thought I'd be celebrating with friends and traveling and starting a new life. My life fell apart. My home was gone. My family was nasty. I just couldn't make sense of my world except I could go outside. I could plant a seed, I could watch it grow, I could get excited, I could feed ducks and listen to quacks, and that was the only thing that restored me.

I think with some of the challenges I'd been through in my life, it's been really easy for me to disconnect from a sense of knowing, both to myself and in a spiritual sense. [Since the trail,] I feel completely present, peaceful, hopeful, [and] full of faith about life, the world, people. I don't feel inundated with the negativities and the pressures. All you need to do is walk and be present. For me, especially when I'm outside and present and doing what I love (being outside), it's a tremendous learning and growth experience. I found I could just trust my gut sense again. It never steered me wrong. That's good for your sense of self--you're being able to trust what you need to do next in your life or how you need to be in your life or what's really important. I was out of touch with it.

I don't connect well to a lot of the stuff people get caught up in and value. I'm quite content to keep living out of my backpack, and I hate shopping. You know, the whole environmentally-conscious thing is just a very tough piece in our world. It's just--it feels fraught with an imminent doom for our planet, and [I'm] trying to figure out at this stage in my life how I can make a difference as an individual in how I live and consume. [There's a growing] sense that we're running out of time, and that's also shifted how I plan to live my life. I'd been on a path that with time I'd fit in some of the dreams along the way. You keep working at your career. [Now] I'm saying, "Career? Who cares!" Maybe by walking and sharing and being with others and at least living with yourself--which seems very selfish, but at least sharing with others--maybe there's a chance that people collectively will care enough to change the course. I think the thing I'm probably struggling with most is also clearest--just how we live on the planet. I can't live like most people do anymore. I just can't do it. It just tears you apart how much we consume. [The trail] affects anyone who walks it. Just knowing it's there, I think that's an incredible thing. It has to be there because if it's not people will lose touch with their connection to the earth, with their connection to other people, with their dreams.

I'm different because of what I've experienced from being with people. It's a really healing experience to have that camaraderie with people hiking or people in town--stopping, talking, and trying to find out, or people giving you food because you're thru-hiking. I got way more than I could have conceived because it was the people and the cultural experience and being in another country, the other hikers, and the incredible welcoming and support you had from people who don't even know you. My friends said, "Why are you crossing the border? You're in a war zone." I thought to myself, "How can

we collectively move and make something change?” It’s very healing to cross a boundary with the weird perceptions you get on TV, like [the U.S. is] a gun country, you’re going to need to be afraid, [and] you’d better be careful because you’re there as a single female. You know what? It was completely fine. I can trust my gut sense, and I can trust people. If I had preconceived ideas, they weren’t about Americans or about people in general. They are more my learned experiences from my family. The people that know you most can really hurt and do it fairly consciously.

It feels like the issue is being true to what fits for you and following that path, wherever that takes you. I remember when I was 26 in the hospital for 5 days. They didn’t know the whole prognosis. They just knew this is a terrible thing. Don’t research it. You’re going to be black with depression. Just live your life, which is pretty tough to tell someone at that age. So I took their advice. I didn’t research it. I thought, “What have I done in my life to date at 26 that I’m so glad I did? What didn’t really matter that much?” Being true to myself feels really key. My pattern has always been I’ll just give up a piece of this or a piece of that or I’ll conform or I’ll submit or whatever. And that’s some female role that’s been very trained and engrained that I don’t really like. I just don’t care that much anymore about what people around me say or think.

[What I’ve come to know in a deep way is] that the world makes sense. There is a spiritual sense in the world. I think when crap happens in our lives and accidents and murders, it’s so easy to get caught up in it and lose focus. When it happens to you, you feel so thrown. I think for me that crossing borders, hiking trails, meeting with strangers, and spending a long intense time with them, you realize that things do make sense. There is an order to things. There is a presence. It’s essentially a good place and a good thing.

The biggest piece is just being able to move past and really experience things on a felt level.

We [thru-hikers] have this incredible exuberance and zest for life that doesn't match people around you. That's what I found, and it didn't fade. I certainly found I was carrying it. People wanted to be around that. If I could have been holding onto some perception of myself as a potentially ill person, I guess I could throw that one out the window. [The trail] was what finally allowed me to say, "You don't have to live your life in the shadow of cancer anymore. Throw it out the window and get out there and live your dreams." I didn't realize how [my hike] was going to shake me up and sort of prod me to want to explore and live my life differently.

When you've gone out there and lived your dream, you have this glow and this energy about you. I have loved spreading that to other people. I find particularly in working with sick and ill people (I work in rehab medicine)--they are just overwhelmed at that point and feeling hopeless and mad and angry. I can relate to all those places. I've been there; I know what it's like. But I realize that the biggest block in all of that is your attitude. If you lose your faith and you stop being able to see the possibilities left, that's when you've had it. The ability to effect a change in that person is to help them see that and believe it's possible. That's where I feel I can make a shift to people.

What I struggle with is sharing my personal story. That gives it more impact, and I've chosen to do that in some settings and not others. I think that was my hardest part with growing up, and I was kind of mad about that. I'd think if only someone could care about me or look in to see how I was doing or take some time to know what I was about. That never really happened. I had to do that for myself.

I think that a really important message in life is to get past putting conditions and limits on things. I've always secretly loved that about nature. I mean I love the fact that it can throw up tornadoes and storms and lightening. Man with all his planning, control issues, and hyper technology just has to stop and adjust. You realize you can't control everything, and it's not a good thing to even try to do that. Hiking along day-after-day in the cold, wet elements, you realize how little you need and that it is not things for the most part that determine your well-being or your happiness. It feels very freeing and also necessary to detach from the need of things to spare more consumerism and damage to the earth.

Trees are symbols of power and of life for me. Somehow the vision I have of a very tall, broad tree fits as a symbol of transformation. I'm not going away. I'm not going to get blown over. I am full of life and will have to be cut down to die. I'm just going to keep on doing what I do, being strong and living life. There's wisdom in that tree. It provides for a whole community of other living things that rely on it for their life and well-being.

Cadence's Primary Themes

Being present, connection, faith, and spiritual healing.

Participant #8: Nuppi

Nuppi finished her thru-hike in 1997 at age 45. She is 52. Her hike took "4 months, 23 days" with only 14 days away from the trail. She has a master's degree, worked as a teacher, and is currently employed as a grant writer. She grew up in New England in a "sprawling orchard among apple trees, tall pine, strawberries, and white

granite.” She is divorced, the mother of grown children, and in recovery from addiction. Nuppi is in a committed relationship.

Figure 6. Nuppi’s transformation image.



[This figure was taken from *The Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Divination and Growth* and reprinted with permission (Anderson, 1998, p. 95). The artist is S. Dorf.]

Nuppi’s Transformative Image

There are 12 faces of strangers. Trust the process. Holes and lines create balance. Community brings strength, and it balances instability.

Nuppi’s Embodied Writing

I am lying on my stomach in the open loft window of the barn shelter looking out over a field of tall grass. It is late May. Wildflowers mingle at the edges of the field. My sleeping bag is pulled up around my shoulders. I relax after a day of hiking through the Virginia countryside. The late afternoon breeze is so delicious. I can taste the crispness in the air. I feel a gentle movement across my face. There is a definite calm about the valley.

Beyond this field, I see tall pine trees flanking the back of the meadow. A hill thick with trees rises above the pines. Wide branches reach into the clouds. I imagine them playing with the fluffy, white shapes scuttling across the sky. The sun is moving down behind the trees. As I scan the scene, I move my eyes down from the top of the trees in time to see puffs of cloud rise up from the ground. Like steam from a teakettle that suddenly rises when the water boils, fog fills the valley. Within seconds I cannot see my hand in front of my face. Fog rolls into the loft, enveloping me in thick, graying dampness. I can see nothing with my eyes. I see everything with my mind. Trust in the wilderness moves into my soul. Clearly I believe the trees, the grass, the flowers, and a hill are inside the fog. The fog lifts. The scene returns. I smile at the view. The wilderness has not changed. I have changed. I trust in what I cannot see. I lift my eyes to the sky. Again the fog rises up out of the ground to meet my gaze. The scene is gone again. I feel its presence in the fog. I peer into the thick, gray blanket. Again, I see nothing. I reach out and touch the dampness. My hand falls through the air. The fog dissipates. The valley reappears. I sigh contentedly and smile.

Time and again the fog fills and empties the space. Each time the wilderness returns, the sun has moved further behind the trees. The darker it gets, the thicker the fog and the longer it lingers. Now darkness consumes the gray. I snuggle into my damp sleeping bag. The fog allows darkness to cover the wilderness. I choose the darkness. I smile in the dark.

This experience has moved more than the moisture. It has moved trust into the barn. Stars twinkle in the space where white clouds danced. I close my eyes. Trust in the

stability of the wilderness rises in me. I see behind closed eyes. I open my eyes and look into the blackness. I see nothing with my eyes. I see everything with my soul.

Nuppi's Story

I was in the fifth grade when my mom told me they were going to get this divorce. I just said, "That's it. I will never trust people again." [T]he kids quit speaking to me. My mother had an affair with a big wheel in town. When I was chosen on the ball team, I was the last one chosen. I was really fat when I was a kid. I've battled weight all the time, and I have an eating disorder that I didn't recognize then. I just knew I was a really fat kid. [Hiking the Appalachian Trail was my childhood dream.] The kids just laughed at me, a big fat kid, like, "You're going to hike the Appalachian Trail?" Yes, I am!

I've always had to take care of myself. My mother dumped a ton of responsibility on me when I was young. My mother was in jail. I was in the seventh grade, and I had to take care of the kids. When I tell stories in programs, I don't say how did I dare to do that all by myself. I do everything all by myself. I had a horribly abusive marriage. There were many times that I really thought I was going to die.

There are pictures of me size 16, huge, stuffing cake in my mouth. I thought if I do not do something I'm going to end up like my mother. I didn't know anything about addiction then. I didn't know that I was an alcoholic or a food addict. I just--I'm not going to look like my mother who lives for food, so I started running. I was only 23 or 24 then, and it took me 6 months to run a half a mile.

I got into recovery in the early 1990s and met the partner that I'm with now. I quit my public school teaching job. I quit my job, sold my house, [and] left my community. My kids were gone. That was a lot to leave. I could do the trail. I'm a real odd duck and

an introvert. I've never fit in anywhere. The only place I really belonged and had a little crowd was when I lived in Knoxville. I got into recovery with alcoholic lesbians, two minorities in the same group.

My last year in teaching, my very closest colleague came to work one day and said, "I have a lump in my breast." I was with her when she called the doctor. She'd had a mammogram the week before. Laura had breast cancer. She was in the hospital and had a breast removed all before Christmas. I helped take care of her classes. She came back the next year, and then she died. When I got to Anderson, I thought, "I'll raise money for breast cancer." That's how [the hike] came about, too--raising money for breast cancer.

[On my early days on the trail,] I was in northern Georgia, and it was cold and raining. I hadn't seen anybody for a few days. I was at the beginning of hypothermia, and I came to a dirt road. I thought I could go home. [J]ust as an alcoholic cannot entertain the thought of a drink, a thru-hiker cannot entertain the thought of going home. That's sort of like life. You have all this stuff that's happened, but you don't go back. You use it to go forward.

I recognize I battle food and accept that. There were many years when I realized I was an alcoholic and a food addict. That's who I am, and I know how to manage it. It's discipline. I couldn't have done the trail if I wasn't disciplined. I don't know that [my A.T. hike] was just a walk in the woods. I grew up in the woods. It's the process of starting in the beginning and ending up on Mt. Katahdin on that narrow little trail that thousands of people do. I didn't blaze the trail, but I blazed my own experience.

My mother didn't have time to come see me [on the trail] and neither did my sister who lives in the White Mountains. Your own blood family is supposed to be there.

They're not. Other people just appeared. You'd meet three women in a group. One person said, "When you get to New Jersey, call me up and I'll give you a place to stay." I get to New Jersey, and I'm out of food. I call her up and say, "Remember me?" She said, "I've taken some time off. Where are you?"

Having done [the trail has allowed] me to trust. I've learned to trust the process. I've learned to trust nature. And knowing that there's an end, you know that there is a beginning and an end, like our life. We're all going to die, and yet the influence of this trail will live on in other people's lives. I also learned to trust men. I really had a huge--I have a lot of abuse issues that I worked out in therapy. Here's all these men and men in the shelters and never once did a man do anything inappropriate. I was amazed. They were kind and nice. It really confirmed, reaffirmed my trust in the male population.

If there was a storm, I could get off the trail, go purify water, and of course the food was on my back. Especially for a child coming from abuse, I was in control. Thunderstorms come and go and rain and snow, I had to be aware of all that. I didn't have to go with people or deal with their needs and wants. The elements are not a problem. Nature's just a part of me.

After many years of struggling with the body image thing, I'm better with that, okay with that. I battle with "What do I hang on to?" There's still a little child in there that would like to have something secure, something to hold on to. I think [my partner] Ela does that for me. I can do that through the experience of the trail. I've been aware of what my strengths and weaknesses are, and I use those strengths. I'm going to be okay, and I'm going to make it through this. I've come to realize that I am a very creative person after spending many years saying I am not. I can look at a piece of land and

design a water feature and a garden. I like soil and earth and water [and] thunderstorms and the ocean. I used to swim a mile in the ocean when I was up in Maine. I would know the currents and the tides. You just feel these things, know these things.

I'm an okay person. When I talk to people, I say that I'm no fantastic hiker. I am no different than you. Anybody can do the Appalachian Trail if they could spend a night in the woods. You can do it. It's all up here [in your mind]. The trail has allowed me to know that and believe that. The whole thing about the trail and this experience has been that whatever happens is okay, just being aware, letting go, moving. I'm really into movement and just moving through it, having the power to move through it.

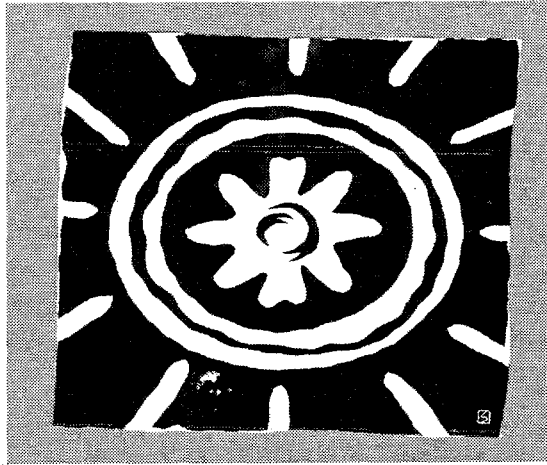
Nuppi's Primary Themes

Acceptance, trusting the process, meaning, and connection.

Participant #9: Groovy

Groovy thru-hiked the trail in 2001 in 6 ½ months at age 39-40. She was 43 years old at the time of the interview. She has a bachelor's degree and is currently employed as a project manager for a private corporation. She is divorced with no children. Groovy did some hiking, backpacking, and camping as a teenager, but then stopped these activities completely for 18 years. In 2000, she attempted an A.T. thru-hike, but completed just 500 miles. A stress fracture in her leg forced her to leave the trail. In 2001, she started over and hiked the entire distance from Georgia to Maine.

Figure 7. Groovy's transformative image.



[This figure was taken from *The Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Divination and Growth* and reprinted with permission (Anderson, 1998, p. 196). The artist is S. Dorf.]

Groovy's Transformative Image

An implosion followed by an explosion, complete with ripples of sound and light and dark, not a destructive explosion, but the movement of creation, a genesis of the soul. A new world was created for me, by me, around me, and I was the sole inhabitant. It was good and bright and sharp and painful with rays of light. I was born anew, and my old self didn't have to die for this newness to emerge. Instead of ending and beginning, perhaps [it was] more of a merging.

Groovy's Embodied Writing

It's mid-October, and I'm somewhere in the Maine North woods. I've walked here all the way from Georgia. Now I'm only a week or two away from the end of my hike, and although I feel a mixture of emotions about this chapter's conclusion, I feel

particularly blessed with this day. Much like the previous days, this one is unusually warm, the air velvety soft against my skin. I'm amazed how perfect my surroundings are. The sun is crisply bright, brilliantly blazing through the quiet forest. The trees have shed many of their leaves, but the woods are still quite colorful. The leaves that remain above the ground are mostly yellow, golden, brown in various shades, some green, occasional reds or oranges. The forest floor is littered with what has already fallen from the branches above--an insanely beautiful riot of colors stretching from my feet in every direction, a true kaleidoscope of crunchy colors. As I walk, I can hear only the sounds of my boots in the leaves and the water in the stream beside me. The A.T. has been following this mountain waterway for a while. Crystal waters are tumbling down the hill, rushing, then smoothly flowing over boulders and creek bottoms. As I hike this stretch of trail, the sounds from the stream are ebbing and flowing as the trail moves away, then closely skirting above the water. An occasional vista downstream gives me pause.

All seems right in this world--all except my mood and my attitude. The stresses of my 6-month hike and my uncertain future are beginning to take their toll. My attitude and psyche are at odds with this glorious fall day, and it sucks! I struggle through the morning, fully aware of how out of sync I am with my surroundings. After a quick lunch break I start hiking, and then I randomly stop at an unremarkable spot in the woods. I lay down in the bed of leaves beside the trail in a circle of sunshine. On my back, splayed in the forest, I close my eyes and begin to cry. I'm completely alone with my tears and my self-pity. I let both wash over me and through me. Then I open my eyes to something remarkable: [it is] the sky, blue sky through the golden leaves above me, high above. The color of the world above the treetops is spectacular, the most achingly beautiful blue I

have ever seen. The world above me and around me is ablaze. The contrasting colors of the autumn leaves and clear azure sky are stunning, lit up by the mid-day sun. As I lay here in my trailside bed of soft leaves, I know I'm seeing the sky for the first time in my life. My tears of sorrow, frustration, and self-pity are being transformed into tears of joy.

Small patches of blue so deep and rich it feels like velvet. A canopy of bright, yellow leaves tinged with green and brown. Warm sun on my face, my hands, my legs. A slight rustling breeze. The leaves beneath me smell of all days, raking the back yard with my father. As I lay here marveling at my newfound eyes, I take lots of photographs. I know the pictures will be beautiful reminders of this day, and I know that they can never capture the essence of what has happened within me this day. I hike a little, trying to make my miles for the day during the remainder of the afternoon. And I take long breaks, laying down in the woods, staring at the blue skies and leaves, feeling totally blessed to be here.

Groovy's Story

I'd like to begin long ago and far away and really with essentially a different person that was me. When I was 16 years old, a group of friends and I--three girls and myself who were in high school together--decided that we were going to take a 2-week backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail. Three nights into that trip we were attacked at our campsite that was set on a beautiful mountain. At least five local men raped us and threatened to kill us and tore up all of our stuff. We escaped with our lives all four of us, but that event changed everything for me.

[Many years later,] there was a series of articles running in our local newspaper that followed a fellow doing a thru-hike. I wouldn't read them. I guess it was too painful

for me to go back and revisit that part of myself. I wasn't aware enough to know that I was grieving for what I had lost, for everything that had been destroyed the night of the attacks. On essentially the 20 year anniversary of the rapes, June of 1978, I was in Chicago on a business trip. My friend Sara lives in Chicago. She was with me and went through the same things that I did. She had produced a journal of sorts that had photographs of our trip in 1978 [and gave it to me].

Seeing the photographs brought me to tears. It took me a long time to actually read the journal, took me several weeks to pick it up and read all the way through it. It was extremely emotional and really the first time that I had consciously and deliberately looked back. She brought with her all the newspaper articles that had been written about the rapes and the aftermath, the manhunt, the preliminary hearings, the trials, etc., etc. Sometime in the spring of 1999, I was in the library and picked up the Bill Bryson book, *A Walk in the Woods*. Before I had even read the first chapter, I knew that I needed to thru-hike the trail. It was like a revelation; it was like a voice telling me this is what you have to do.

I began planning in 1999 and in 2000 left to go on my thru-hike. It changed me in so many ways from the moment I decided that that's what I have to do up until the time I finished it and beyond. It's still kind of unfolding. I had to hike through the same section of trail that we hiked [in 1978]. I passed a lot of the same places we passed the day after the rapes, a lot of the same landmarks. I thought it was the most lovely section of trail I'd ever seen. It represented something cathartic and amazing for me. The weather was spectacular the 2 days that I went through there. I think that it was certainly symbolic of

me kind of taking back that piece of my life, and I think that it had just lost its power over me.

Sometimes when I think about it or I read something that I've written or I look at pictures, it just absolutely floors me that I did that. The journey that I went on in planning my thru-hike and actually stepping out on the trail by myself and having such a good go of it and such a reaffirming experience, it made me realize that I could do anything that I wanted to. I had the power within me to do something as remarkable as what I did, just the fact of a woman going out by herself and hiking 2,200 miles nearly, regardless of past experiences or anything like that. I think it was a remarkable self-confidence booster because I stood at the top of Katahdin in Maine and said, "I got here all by myself." I certainly had the love and support and prayers of friends and family, but I did it all by myself. I knew I could do anything, and that the only thing standing between me and achieving my dreams were my own fears and my own limitations at seeing clearly what I needed to do to make myself more whole.

When I finished my hike, I was a bit lost. I was certainly in transformation in almost every aspect of my life, and you know I kept some anchors to keep me grounded. I think that just based on the fact that I decided to thru-hike and was not successful on the first attempt, but still had the strength and the pull to pursue it again was a very positive thing for me because I saw that I could fail and still succeed.

My relationship with Sara has become much stronger. She and I talk regularly. We have spent a great deal of time talking about the rapes and what was going on with us before they happened, when we were planning our hike and afterwards and the years

since. There has been a kind of healing process that both of us have been on since the attack and the aftermath.

I've really made some very hard decisions and some really very good decisions in the past few months. I had an epiphany a couple of years ago and realized this is not the life I'm supposed to be living. I felt I was not in the correct life or that I was living an alternate life or something. I know that I'm not living the life that I should be living. I think that hearing my own voice and listening to that voice and honoring that voice has become much more important. I'm considering starting my own business. I think I have a very viable and creative business idea that I hope to kind of put into action sometime later this year or early next.

I've been in un-collection mode since my hike finished. I've had many, many yard sales and gotten rid of a lot of stuff. The ownership of things and collecting things have become much, much less important because they are just things. I think I recognized while I was hiking that that interest and that passion that I had in collecting things, it seemed to me that I was trying to fill a hole in my life or fill an emptiness that I couldn't possibly fill that way, and that it was a much more esoteric and spiritual need that I had for filling up my life. Some of the changes that occurred to me spiritually and emotionally during my hike filled that hole instead. I know that I could carry my world on my back for 6 months and be content and not need anything. It made me realize how unimportant some of the things that we surround ourselves with are in life. I'm very much a non-consumer.

I've seen what I'm capable of doing from a physical perspective. I've become very conscious of my body and all the things that it allows me to do, and I've become

very thankful for it. I often walk and kind of silently give thanks for all of my blessings both spiritually, emotionally, physically and you know, thank my legs for carrying me to places that I love to go and thank my all my senses for bringing the world inside me and allowing me to experience it and all the other parts that get me up a big hill and allow me to do fun, adventurous things that I love.

Since I finished my hike I have begun to find the strength and the courage and my voice to let people know who I really am. “Hey, this happened to me, and it was really important to me and makes me part of who I am.” Connecting with people on a more emotionally intimate basis has become the filling of the hole or the emptiness. During my hike, I kept a journal, something I really like to do. Sometimes it was a chore, but for the most part I kept it pretty faithfully. I look back on it and read big parts of it from time to time. I like what I wrote and have written quite a bit since. I think that I’ve learned that I love to write. One of the biggest things certainly that I’ve come to know about myself in a very deep way is that I have control over my destiny and my actions and my life. That’s something that I don’t think I recognized before. I don’t know that I even realized that I had a voice. Just finding that voice has been a huge awakening within me.

It took a lot of sacrifices, a lot of personal sacrifices to make [the hike] happen. It had a significant impact on my husband. We were struggling with our relationship at the time. Without knowing what it was, I realized that I was terribly unhappy about something, that there was emptiness in my life. Certainly a thru-hike and an absence from someone for 6 months don’t lend to building a relationship. The hike itself and the separation of 6 months resolved that good. It was a gateway to building a life on my own without my husband who I had been with for 17 years. [It was] becoming more of a

whole person, a whole self. It was like growing up for me, separating myself, and becoming responsible for my own actions. I'd made the decision that that's what I'm going to do, and it's much more important for me to honor myself than to honor what other people want me to do or don't want me to do. That was definitely a change for me because I think that up until that point I was always more concerned with others needs than I was with my own.

I wrote an article [about my first A.T. hike] after reading the December issue of [a national hiking journal]. There is a section in every issue called Reflections. The topic was "Strong Women." I think it very much symbolizes the transformation that has occurred within me because not only is it a story of the transformation itself, from being a rape victim to a rape survivor to somebody who goes back and kind of faces down what happened and heals through the hike, but also just a transformation of finding that voice. [I'm] actually finding that I'm willing to talk about it and wanting to talk about it and tell people who I am.

During my hike, I had a lot of moments of feeling just truly, truly blessed with being out there and feeling very connected with what was out there and connected with myself. Despite the circumstances of what brought me to the trail in the first place and all the other sea changes that were taking place in my life and in me, I was always able to fall back and recognize that I was just surrounded with blessings, both outside and within.

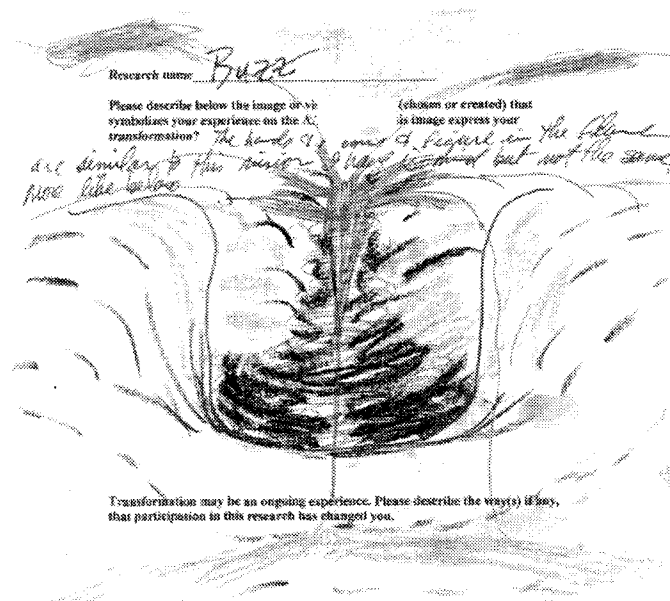
Groovy's Primary Themes

Healing, experiencing nurturance, finding one's voice, and becoming whole.

Participant #10: Buzz

Buzz thru-hiked the trail from March 2002 to July 2002 and May 2003 to August 2003 at ages 50 and 51. It took 6 months. She was 53 at the time of the interview. She is one of two women in the group who had her thru-hike interrupted. Buzz has a Ph.D. and works in the field of health advocacy. Although she has taught college courses in backpacking, she described her knowledge as largely theoretical before her thru-hike. She had spent a maximum of 2 nights in the woods. Buzz divorced her life partner after the completion of her A.T. thru-hike and is in a new relationship. She is currently preparing for her next long distance hike.

Figure 8. Buzz's transformation image.



Buzz's Transformation Image

My drawing represents my awakening over the past 3 years, facilitated by my path on the A.T. as well as off. The horizontal line at the base of the green vessel is my base level of consciousness or what passes for the line between the reality of the universe/beyond and my perception of it. The red reservoir below it is life, passion, juice,

soul, [and] whatever makes a person a person and connects them to all other beings. The thin red line that rises to the edge of the green vessel and continues up is my life line to heart, soul humanness, which it turns out began as my father and is nourished by all those with whom I have/do truly connect in a real way, a touching heart. As I walked the first half of the trail, the thick blackness that obscured my ability to contact my own heart, let alone another's, began to shift. I learned to cry. I learned to allow feeling for however fleeting a moment. I came to be okay with being with myself.

That green vessel that is me was once so very small, and all that it contained was the blackness of guilt, shame, and fear with only the dimmest connections to the thin red line--my father, my first real friend at age 12, high school and college mentors, Alice at least at the beginning of our 22 years. That vessel was a tight circle with high walls and let almost no one in and no one out. Walking the A.T. stretched it into an oval that grew and grew and finally has burst open as I learned that there are no limits to being, to feel my heart, and to feel the connection with all life that is at the center, but not really as there is no center, no inside, no outside, just inter-being. I don't always get it or touch it, but I'm getting it, that it's always there no matter how I distract myself. So the black churning diminishes, but never totally disappears, not yet anyway. Hours of solitude on the trail stripping away the "build up" of my life--seeing/feeling body change, confidence change, emotional change, relating to others change, even going by a new name--that's the gift from the A.T. and the meditation practice on and off the trail.

The red grows in volume and branches out and strengthens--life, real life, paying attention, being there wherever there is, connecting. The blue dotted lines are the "me" I can see--growth, widening the container that is me. The wider the container, the more can

be held without the blackness obscuring life, connection. Open-ended, widening, connecting as big as the ocean of land that I saw in the Roan Mountain highlands, from the White Mountains, from Katahdin, and as deep as the deepest grounding in meditation--limitless.

Buzz's Embodied Writing

The trees are pulling me upward, now the rocks, the iron hand holds. Can I get up them alone? Smooth rock more welcoming and the peak are drawing me upward. Now I can see the vertical folds of rock, dark against the blue sky, looking like organ pipes! Scrambling upward against the gritty dark gray folds, people slowly descending, hearing "You're going the wrong way!" After 2:00, it's time to leave the peak, but I'm climbing upward, wind blowing harder, wish I had gloves. Knees scrape and I see blood on knees, on the rocks, just keep hugging the rock. Don't look down. Wind in my face, heart racing, head calculating, God, it is so beautiful up here--blue and gray of the mountain and rolling green stretched out. Keep going. Don't stop to look, no time. The table land--now I get it, the name makes sense. Can see the summit out and to the right of me. Is the distance distorted? How close really? Fewer people in sight. Two coming down the last ridge and a group near the peak. Running, rock hopping, have gotten this far--better than returning having failed the summit. How is it that the rocks are so flat and welcoming to my feet?

Pass the small spring where two descending hikers have stopped, thirsty. Never pass a good spring, but now have to go. Time is standing still. The wind is all I hear, eerie yet serene. Heart pounding, but I can't feel my legs. Am I tired? Now at the foot of the last ridge, passed by a lone, older man descending. Did he say something? Running up

the rocky steps now on the final spine of the final mountain, chest heaving, tears, not breathlessness. Two hikers at the termination sign. God, don't leave! Two thousand miles planning the picture. What if no one is there to take it? Won't be Alice and me, now won't even be me! Running, hear my voice "Don't go!" The wind swallows it, and the heads of the hikers bounce out of sight down the mountain away from me. Shit! Now what? Camera, where's my camera? Know I have six pictures left. Running, really running, then slow at the sign. So quiet, no people, no animals, only the sound of the wind rushing by my ears. Tying my hat to the sign. Get a picture like all my other self-portraits, my hat. Am I real? More real than the hat? Do I exist alone? Maybe this is the right way to end, alone as I began. Alone with myself and okay with that. Snap the picture.

What is that? A crow, a crow hangs in the thermal just off the peak of Katahdin. Thank you. A sign. Alone is not alone. I am okay. Take another picture of just the hat to be sure. Click. Stand next to the sign, arm outstretched. Self-portrait with my body in it. Push, no click. Fuck! Didn't have six, just two. Cry, then laugh. This is it. The lesson. I know I am here; I got here. Alone is okay, laughing out loud. Only five minutes have passed at the summit. Time to go. Fill my soul with one last 360° view and run back towards the rest of my life.

Buzz's Story

I'm not technically a thru-hiker, although I fully intended to be and started out in that direction. The whole thing about being responsible with jobs and stuff--I actually got a phone call on top of the mountain in North Carolina offering me a job. The initial conception of the hike that was to occur in 2002 was to be a 20th anniversary hike for my

partner and me. We'd been together 19 years when we starting talking about doing this. Things hadn't been going particularly well in that relationship. I'm the one who usually acts out, so things were pretty much in turmoil during year 2001.

I planned it so that I would be starting (it was a late start, March 28th) on my 50th birthday. I had decided the second 50 years of my life were not going to be like the first 50. I had been raised to be controlled by guilt, shame, and fear. I was afraid of most things, except the things that had a script so I knew what to do. I left in the dark on the train. I had always wanted to shave my head. Now I don't know what that's about either, but my hair had been real long when I was a little kid. When my younger brother came along, my father had to start taking care of me. My hair got short real fast because he couldn't braid. So [I did it] at the Lenfoot Inn. In my room that night I took nail scissors and cut it off as short as I could. I had a razor and some Gillette Foamy. I got up the next morning, and I was shaving my head and nicked my ear. It looked like somebody was slaughtering hogs in the bathroom. These women who I'd had dinner with the night before asked, "What are you doing?" And I told them. They said, "Well stop, you're going to hurt yourself." They helped me shave my head. This was all before sunrise. I went out and watched the sun come up in my bald head. I'd left a fringe in the front sticking out from the baseball cap and took off.

Even if I didn't walk a step on the Appalachian Trail, I had made a decision to do something on my own that nobody else was particularly in favor of. I got to the start of the trail and thought I've already accomplished a lot. My goal was to do a thru-hike, but it was also to pay attention to what was going on and make my own decisions. If I didn't finish, who cares? If I turned around the first night and came home that would be fine. I

had a plan, but I also was going to let myself out of it no matter what happened. I had this telephone with me, and I was having to call weekly to unemployment and tell them the two people on my list to check off.

I was calling to check in with [my partner] that she sent the [applications], and I ended up in the woods all day long hiking by myself, but periodically having these gut wrenching phone calls. This relationship was coming to a really sloppy end because I don't end things well. I never thought that I was worthy of taking up space. There was no place for me to be. I had to make sure everybody else was up. [I was] just calling her to share this with her because if somebody else didn't experience with me, it couldn't be real. My experience wasn't enough.

I had gotten this call about a job. I rented the car and went to my job interview with my bald head and my hiking clothes, and they hired me anyway. So this is also at the age of 50, the first time that I was out of the job. I've been a schoolteacher and in public kinds of jobs, and you can't do that. I got back [to the trail]; I reversed the process after the interview, and I was back. [My partner] was saying to me, "Well, you know you don't need to finish this. You've proven you can do it. You've walked from Georgia to Tennessee. Why don't you just come home?" She was saying all the things I wanted to hear.

I thought, "I'm really having a fantastic time hiking. I can't believe how much fun this is, all the people that I'm meeting, how good it feels to not have to negotiate anything. I get up when I want to get up, I stop when I want to stop, the preparations I've made have been adequate, maybe not the greatest, but certainly not the worst. I've seen people in a lot worse shape than me. No, I want to keep hiking, and besides I figured they

weren't going to offer me the job." Then I got a phone call [from my partner]. "You've got to come home." And I kept saying "no." I mean it's like an addiction, something so familiar and something that you want, but when you get there it's not it.

It was this huge emancipation step for me to say no. Maybe I do know what I think. Maybe I do know what I feel. Maybe I am okay just myself. Now mind you, I had three college degrees by then. I had been recognized by the professional organization I belong to as being this highly competent person. I had all the outside trappings, but not the inside ones. I still wasn't ready to leave that relationship. I just wanted more independence. I kept learning about this relationship that was also about me.

I got offered the job. I decided to take it, but held out for getting at least as far as Harpers Ferry. When I finally got there, it was just this really incredibly exhilarating feeling and, at the same time, this horrible sadness because it wasn't going to be a thru-hike. I was stopping. I was going to move to Durham, but I was only going to move temporarily and go by myself and decide if I wanted to keep the job. Implicit in that was to decide if I wanted to keep this relationship. I packed up, and in August I moved to Durham. I was thinking, "I'm a fairly competent human being. I've walked 1,000 miles. I've stayed dry in thunderstorms. I've figured out what to do when I ran out of water. Maybe I can exist on my own."

By October I took one of the mindfulness stress reduction courses that Duke University offers. I took a class in the fall, and I took a class in the spring. I missed the last three classes because on May 1st I went back to Harpers Ferry to start on the northern half of the trail. The first half of the trail was a whole lot of self-doubt and surprise that some of my doubt was unfounded. There was a lot of camaraderie with other hikers.

When you start at the south half, things kind of shake out, and you end up seeing the same people over and over again at shelters and in towns.

I cried hysterically a lot of the southern half. I'd be walking along thinking about things and replaying events over the 19 years in this relationship, and I'd be bawling. I was sitting on the side of the mountain. I had just been followed by some jerk in a pickup truck for a period of time. He kept following me until I pulled out my cell phone. It had absolutely no coverage, but he took off. I'd been through one of the times that was a little nerve wracking. Suddenly on top of the mountain I had cell phone coverage, and I had this horrible conversation with my partner. I'm sitting on the side of the trail crying my guts out, and these two young guys that I had seen every night for the past 2 weeks walked by. They looked at me and mouthed, "Are you okay?" And I was, "Yeah, boohoo." So I hung up and walked about a half a mile more.

When I went back to the trail in May, I was a little more stable. I had a meditation practice that was fairly consistent. I started in Harpers Ferry in May. The northern half was much more solitary, and there had been a drought. On the northern half, the first 37 days it rained some portion of the day. I had learned so much on the first half that I was wet all day long, but dry and happy at night. It was such a relief to get back on the trail. The characteristics of the walk were so different, and yet there was a sense of "It's okay to take up space, and I'm fine. I'm wet and cold and hungry. Alright, tomorrow will be different. Who's here now?" The walking in the second half was much more meditative than the walking in the first half. The connection to place seemed deeper in the second half because I was more in myself. Things around me seemed more real. All the physical stuff seemed so easy compared to what was going on in my head.

I spent most of my life before hiking the trail up in a corner watching myself. [I was] trying to figure out all the ways the situation should go so that I would be some place that wouldn't make anybody mad. By the end of the trail, I wouldn't say I was wholly there, but a whole lot more. I was inside here actually having the experience that was going on around me, not just watching. The other thing that impressed me most about the whole walk was having your faith restored. Not everyone in the world is a jerk because people really do look out for each other. You are lying down to sleep jammed in between two people you've never met before, and you're really glad that they're big and heavy because it's freezing out. You want to be next to the biggest, heaviest, fattest, warmest person you can find. It's like being plucked out of one entire society and plopped down in another. It's a chance to reinvent yourself.

[My partner] was going to climb Katahdin with me. We started up, but the weather turned bad. It was raining, storming on the top, so we turned around, and I was thinking, "Can I bear walking 2,172 ½ miles and not get my picture taken at the sign that I've been thinking about for the past 2,000 miles?" I was willing to go down and struggling very hard with that. I was struggling hard with thinking, "You know--am I only going down because she's here and I don't want to get hurt? I don't want to hurt her. If she weren't here, would I keep going? Well, yeah, probably." Going down the hill, I turn around and look back, and the sky had cleared. The peak was exposed. I said, "I've got to go back [up.]" [Buzz climbed the peak alone.]

It's been over a year since the end of the second part [of the hike], and I had kind of a year hiatus in the middle, not quite a year. The physical transformations themselves make everything feel different. I think the sense of myself of being a whole lot mentally

stronger than I ever thought I was was fairly immediate, but the impact of that wasn't. I was calmer than I have ever been before and less easily intimidated by almost everybody, except by the people closest to me. I was a total workaholic, 70 to 80 hours a week, that kind of stuff. I don't think that a career . . . it doesn't matter anymore to me. It's kind of like been there, done it, got the T-shirt. I would just like to figure out a way to get back in the woods more.

Part way through the second half of the hike, at the Delaware Water Gap, I thought I don't really need to make very much money. I have been envious of people who have nice homes and nice cars and all that and thinking I should work harder and maybe invest. Now it's, "What? Are you crazy?" If you buy that stuff, you have to take care of it. You don't want to do that. I've been trying to figure out how to get more old ladies in the woods. I think that would be fun. I met a guy who does adult substance abuse treatment programs by taking people on hikes in the Appalachian Trail, but he's only doing men. I said, "Maybe you have room for me."

You're standing in the Grayson Highlands, and you look out, and there's just this ocean of blue undulating mountains as far as you can see all the way around. You know there are highways and everything else out there, but you can't see them. My God, this exists! This calm place exists in the midst of all this other craziness around it. So [there is] the sense that you don't have to go there to get it; you carry it with you. That's some combination I think of the mediation practice and the trail experience, but the two go together. They're seamlessly together for me. Often the images that would come up would be that hillside of trilliums or standing in the middle of a river in Maine, one of the first ones that you have to ford and you're up to your waste in ice-cold water. That whole

idea of impermanence is probably the most important thing I've learned either from the mediation practice or from the trail because it really is true. Whatever is going on, whether it's really good or really bad, it isn't going to last for long. If it's good, enjoy it. And if it's not, slog through it and wait for the next thing to happen. The weather will change, the terrain will change, the people will change, and your blisters will change. And be reasonably prepared, and do your best, and see what happens. That's a whole different way of looking at life than fear of failing, shame at not performing, and guilty about not doing the best you could. It's a completely different way of living, and the only thing I could possibly regret is that I did it when I was 50 instead of when I was 20.

I think what matters to me most now is being and feeling real and being around other people who are. The idea of idle chatter and idle behavior, why waste your breath and time on that? I stopped watching television because of the noise and the blare and the make you want something you don't even need that hurts somebody else to produce it. How I treat people at work and in my family must be different because they're all treating me differently. They haven't been anywhere, so it must be me. I think I learned I actually do have the capacity to connect to people. A part of this relationship thing with my partner was a repeat of my relationship with my mom. She's just recently at 76 been diagnosed with schizo-affective disorder, so my touchstone for sanity was insanity in a way. That's kind of a distortion of reality, but true in that I really thought I could not emotionally connect to people. I really thought I was a totally unlovable person. I met just wonderful people. That willingness to believe what you experience yourself and not what people tell you about what you're experiencing, that's a big difference for me. That's a big difference for me.

I used to joke that what I needed to do was grow an internal locus of control, and I'd laugh about it, but it was really true. I used to think that if you went through all the layers of me and got to the center, there would be nothing there. Through both the hiking and the people and the surroundings and the meditation practice and the learning about some other things, what I know now is that if you get through all the layers to the middle of me, everything is there. It's the layers that are the distortion.

I really have a sense of trying to get out of every minute I have, whatever there is there because I'm not on the upside anymore. For years I have carried things around to prove to myself I was here or that I had people who cared about me. I had letters from the 70s. I don't have that stuff anymore. I had a little bonfire, and I burned up tons of things that I've been carrying around, boxes of cards. I've given away boxes of books. I've given away articles of clothing. I've given away tons of things it seems like to me because I don't need those things anymore.

Buzz's Primary Themes

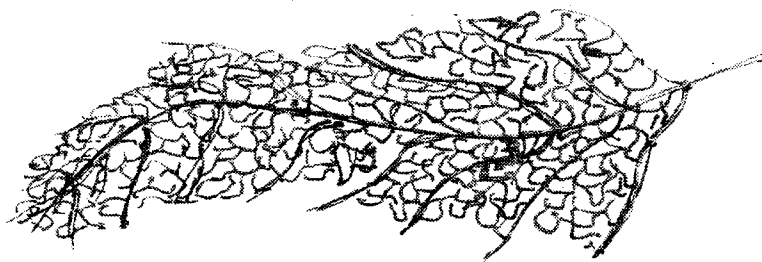
Confronting fear, becoming present, remembering one's place, and impermanence.

Participant #11: GottaHike!

GottaHike! was 60 years old when she completed her thru-hike in 2002. At the time of the interview, she was 64. She is one of two participants in the study who had her thru-hike interrupted. Though she walked the entire 2,000 plus miles in a total of 5 ½ months, she left the trail shortly after the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center when hiking "no longer seemed right." The remaining miles were completed the following year. Previous outdoor adventures included car camping with

her family during her childhood and walking across England during a teaching sabbatical. She ran the Boston Marathon in 2005. GottaHike! has a Ph.D. and is a university administrator. She is married with grown children.

Figure 9. GottaHike!'s transformation image.



GottaHike!'s Transformation Image

The image I chose is the lacy structure of a leaf that I picked up outside the shelter. Though the leaf has been attacked by mites, blown about by the wind and rain, its inner structure remains intact, still strong though seemingly delicate.

GottaHike!'s Embodied Writing

Crossing the road, I begin a gradual, then steep ascent by switchback to the top of Blood Mountain. Blood Mountain is known for the red hue of the lichen covering its rocks, but it was named for a battle between the Cherokee and Creek Indians that was so fierce, legend says, the mountain ran with blood.

The morning showers have worsened into furious wind and pounding rain. As I hike onto the open rock summit, I feel once again like the only person in the world. I pick my way across gray rock in dense fog with the wind in my face, blowing me backwards. I am thinking suddenly of the evening I struggled up the slope of White Cap Mountain and battled my way across its windy summit, trying to find my way on my own to the shelter.

This morning, the gray, windy, ethereal circumstances are similar, but the spark of confidence newly ignited within me then is now a mature, steady flame. Back then, nearly to Katadhin, I had awakened to the knowledge that I could persevere, feel my way, and trust my good judgment to get me through.

As I pick my way across the rocks of Blood Mountain on this morning in similar weather conditions, I am stronger, wiser, and more tenacious. Springer Mountain is only 28 miles away, and I am almost there. Learning how to operate a camp stove, cook in the rain, set up a tent, set up a tent in the rain, take it all down without getting my clothes and gear wet, and keeping my socks dry has been tough. Learning how to hitch a ride, sleep in a hostel, sleep in a shelter, and be self-sufficient, independent, and non-dependent has been difficult. Learning to listen to my body, my thoughts, my intuition, my needs has been liberating. It has all been an exquisite education in patience, forbearance, endurance, and courage. I am glad I have had the opportunity to accomplish what I set out to do. And I am glad it is almost over. I will miss the tall green solitude of walking through the trees with only the birds, insects, rustling leaves, and unseen wildlife for company.

When I reach the shelter on Springer Mountain, two-tenths mile from the terminus of my hike, the heavens once again open, and a thunderstorm rumbles in. I will not miss the sudden thunderstorms! I duck into the shelter, shaking my head in disbelief. A thunderstorm for the final curtain? As the last of the thunder rumbles over the mountains and the birds resume their song, I pick up my poles and walk the two-tenths mile to the bronze plaque on Springer Mountain. A tortoise under a brown and amber shell appears at the edge of the plaque just as I lift my foot for the final step. She under her shell and I under my pack cross the finish line together.

I turn around to the view behind me. The curtain of mist from the late afternoon storm lifts on a stage of blue-green mountains, stretching as wide and as far as my eye can see, as deep as my spirit can hold. The trees glisten with jewels and sparkle in the recovering light.

GottaHike!'s Story

The actual focused dream of hiking the A.T. was something that I heard about as a child through my father, but it was never something presented or anything that I ever really thought about doing. I was always a really active person, but never considered myself to be athlete, in fact quite the opposite. I was a real kind of tomboy as a young child.

When I got to be about 10 or 11, my mother sort of put a stop to all that. You have to be a young lady. Education was always held in high regard in our family, but not physical education. I always felt sort of apologetic for having as much energy as I did. Women were not scholar athletes. They were scholars or athletes, but mostly that stopped after school. You became a wife and mother, and that was sort of it. You lived happily every after. That's not what my experience has been.

[Years later,] I began looking into the Appalachian Trail, and I thought, "One of these days I'm going to do that hike." Then one of my daughters was raped, and life got very complicated for 10 to 15 years. There were all kinds of things that I was much more involved in, and I didn't even think about doing anything like hiking the trail. That wasn't part of what I was doing.

I had a sabbatical where I walked across England by myself, but I wasn't camping. My children were teenagers at camp, and my husband was at home working. I

just did this in the summer. When I came back, I was looking for long distance trails I could do closer to home. There really wasn't a lot written, particularly by women about women's things, and if I talked to anybody, they were very discouraging you know. You can't do that. Women don't do that.

When the dream was reborn, I seriously started looking into what do I need to do. I need to get in shape. I have to find out more about this. The first part was--the first third really--trying to figure out if I could do it and logistics of my body and the food and getting things all figured out, how to actually do it. Then I was distracted by trying to keep relationships--figure out how to do the hike and still keep my relationships with other people, with my family and people who wanted to join me and people who were supporting me--how to keep those intact and whether I should keep those intact. The third part was getting those other two resolved and being able to claim the hike for myself.

I think [my transformation] started after I resolved [issues]. I did that by learning what I could do physically and mentally and also by resolving those relationship issues. While the relationships didn't tend to become less important, they became less able to distract me so that I could experience everything in that present moment.

September 11th happened right before I got back on the trail at Rock Fish Gap. I hiked for a few weeks, but it wasn't . . . it didn't feel right. Here's a really good example of an understanding of who I was and what was important and how I took that in hand. In the past, I might have continued to hike even though I didn't feel quite right because I had set out to do it. As a responsible, task-oriented adult, you set out to do what you're going to do. My body didn't feel . . . it just didn't feel right, so I got off the trail. I came

to be present to myself in every respect: my body, my emotions, my intellect, my feeling of being in touch, in harmony with that part of the universe, part of other people, part of a tree. I didn't feel like I needed to explain that to anyone or even to myself because I knew it was right for me.

During my hike, I was able to leave behind some issues that I had been working on for a long time. I was finally able to let go of the heartbreak of my daughter's rape and see the progress we had all made during her recovery. I said goodbye to my parents who gave me a lot of love for the New England woods and taught me how to dream and how to act. And I gave myself permission to accept the human frailties we all share and to celebrate the gift of living fully before I die. I still wrestle with the difference between acts of kindness and the dysfunction of enabling and co-dependency, though those differences have become much clearer and easier to accept.

I came to really value sharing the woods with the birds, animals, sky, clouds, wind, trees, flowers, roots, rocks. I felt so at home in the universe and so grateful to have the opportunity to be there outdoors in all kinds of weather. It was exceptional to feel so at home and in harmony with all that was around me, tiny speck in the universe though I may be. That last third of my hike was a pretty much every day experience. I just really appreciated being able to be present where I was, doing what I was doing, co-existing with that. It was even more than co-existing, being part of, in harmony with everything around me.

My first encounter with a bear was [an] exceptional [experience] as were the times when I had to climb up, over, through, between huge rocks with a heavy pack and no one to witness or rescue me if I fell or otherwise toppled myself. I was always too

busy at those times strategizing how to solve the insolvable to distract myself with fear or worry. And I was always amazed on the other side of the situation that all had indeed gone well and I had done it!

I prefer to experience myself and my life in a much more present way. It's not as easy as it was in the woods because the woods are a much more harmonious place to experience that. Just being part of the birds and the animals and the sky, the trees, the breeze, I still seek those opportunities, and I do that as often as I can. I didn't become a different person as a result of my experience, but I'm a person more in touch with who I always wanted to be and who I always thought I was and could be. It helped me to really become more in touch with that person.

In addition to feeling much more grounded, [I have] a much more clear sense of myself in terms of self-confidence, who I am, what I can do, and so forth. I am much more self confident, rely less on others (though I always appreciate their input and efforts to help), and feel completely comfortable with who I am, my strengths as well as my human foibles. The trail taught me many things about resilience, resourcefulness, persistence, and patience. I am much more in tune with my intuitive understanding of situations and people, trust my perceptions, and am not afraid to act on them. I am more outspoken especially when passionate about an issue and am not afraid to speak the truth as I know it.

I also have a real need to be of more service, to do something that really helps, really makes a difference. I don't feel that I've done that with my life yet. It was really important for me to come back and write up my trip. I wanted to say to other women like me who have spent most of their adult life in responsible roles of wife, mother, career

path, and so forth, “Hey, you can do something for yourself. It doesn’t have to be hiking. Whatever it is that you dream that you want to do, you can go ahead and do it.” I would like to touch other women who are like I was before I did it and like I was before when I was kind of struggling to get through some really tough things that were going on in my life and I had lost my way.

GottaHike!’s Primary Themes

Integration, wholeness, harmony, and awe.

Participant #12: Bernadette

Bernadette thru-hiked the trail in 2002 with her spouse in 5 ½ months at age 42. She was 45 at the time of the interview. She has a bachelor’s degree and is employed as an information technologist at a small private company. She does not have children. Her earliest experiences in the outdoors were with the Girl Scouts where she camped with her troop and attended summer camp. As a child, she spent time “roaming around in the woods behind my house.” She is not sure that her hike was truly transformative.

Figure 10. Bernadette’s transformation image.



[The figure was taken from *The Celtic Oracles: A New System for Spiritual Divination and Growth* and reprinted with permission (Anderson, 1998, p. 161), S. Dorf, artist]

Bernadette's Transformation Image

I'm not sure why, but the hands with the wreath coming out from them spoke to me. Are the hands a metaphor for tossing things up in the air and letting them come what may? What do we toss up--our jobs, our relationships, the things with which we are familiar and comfortable with? There is no indication of where it all lands. This is a course we chart for ourselves. If what we toss up lands right back in our hands is it a missed opportunity? Maybe that is what pulls long distance hikers back to the trail, an opportunity to toss it all up again.

Bernadette's Embodied Writing

I am in Georgia. My thru-hike is in its infancy. It is mid-morning (on what will become the coldest day of hiking of my trip). I am wearing almost all the clothes I have with me, and my bandana is on "bandito" style to keep the cold wind off my face. As we wind up and around these mountains, I am intermittently shedding clothes on the sunny side of the mountain and adding clothes on the shady side. I am reminded of what I love about hiking in winter--it's the nakedness of the terrain. I am in a mostly deciduous forest now, and bare trees reveal all the undulations of the landscape. In all directions I see the creases of the mountain, like a piece of paper that has been crumbled into a ball, then opened up, and smoothed over conical shapes to form the mountains. The creases remain to become stream beds and natural paths.

In one such vertical crease in front of me is a band of rock that seems to run from the top of the mountain to the bottom, at least as far as I can see. The rocks are covered with a blanket of green velvety moss. For a moment, it is as if everything else in sight is in black and white, and I am totally absorbed by the beauty of this emerald formation.

First I am seeing it in the distance, [and] then I am stepping gingerly across it--the moss being worn away where hikers have been before. Now, because my husband stops for a break, I turn around to take it in again. I imagine the hand of God at the top of the mountain. It is a large hand that is cupped and holding a handful of rocks and boulders. The hand tips and the rocks are falling out and running down the side of the mountain--each rock stopping in its designated place. The moss is added over time. The impact of this beauty is only revealed to those who pass here in this moment.

Φ

I am floating in a mountain stream in Maine, and I am naked. The stream is cool and refreshing. This is the reward for a long, hot day of hiking. Others hikers are nearby--just down stream--and I hear them talking and laughing as they make their dinner. Can they see me naked? I don't think so, but I'm proud of my body. I have been on the trail nearly 5 months, and I'm as light and fit as I've been in years.

Bernadette's Story

As I thought about the question of whether a transformation had taken place after the thru-hike--the hike for me ended in 2002 and I'm 45 now--I think there is some kind of transformation going on and maybe it started then. I don't know if it really occurred because I'm hitting middle age or because I'm been on this thru-hike or some combination of both.

Growing up, I had been in the Girl Scouts. I really enjoyed scouting, going to summer camp, and that type of thing. Then Bill Bryce's book, *A Walk In The Woods*, came out. That kind of got [my husband and I] thinking about it again. We started doing a little bit of backpacking, and I think that I had this kind of growing discontent with or just

kind of lack of satisfaction with my work. I was thinking about the experiences that we don't have because we're so busy working. I kept thinking, "Why do we need to keep on keeping on? What is the point?"

When people ask you to describe your experiences on the trail, often they're interested in how you were touched by nature. So much of my experience is how I was touched by humanity. People just seem to adopt you, and they're just overwhelmingly nice. It's hard to understand why because you don't feel that in your everyday life, or I didn't feel that in my everyday life. A lot of what I experienced was how I was touched by people wanting to help you as you went along the way. These small towns economically weren't very strong towns, and yet people were reaching out to the hiking community with not much to gain by it. You are just totally and constantly amazed by the people that are reaching out to you for no other reason than that you're a hiker. It makes you think about why we don't do that in our daily lives. I'm guilty of just kind of passing humanity by and not thinking about it too much, except for when you're in the woods and you're the benefactor of it.

[W]hat was more challenging at the southern end was the cold. I'm living in South Carolina, and I'm very much used to the heat. I'm not used to cold weather at all, and that was the more challenging aspect of it. Your feet are taking such a huge amount of abuse, and you keep thinking, "Oh, I'm so good, I'm so fit, but I feel like a worn out racehorse." I never really did too much of a tally of how much weight I lost, but I imagine I was about 20 pounds lighter. For both my husband and myself, a fairly significant weight loss occurred very quickly.

I think that my husband--he is a gift. I was 25 when I met him and had already kind of given up on the possibility that I would meet a life partner. I feel very fortunate to have him in my life and to share something like this. Spending 24/7, 365 with each other, if this can't break up your marriage, nothing can. I was really hard on him at times. One thing about a thru-hike is it's really just another slice of life. You still have good and bad days. We're pretty lucky that we've always had a very easy and good relationship. We enjoy doing things together, a lot of the same things, yet there are things that both of us do that the other one doesn't do. The other person has the space [to do] their own thing.

Coming back, I felt very disconnected, very unemotionally involved which was really nice. There's this level of detachment where you can look at things from a totally different perspective that you wish you could have every day. "What's the problem? What can we do to fix it?" instead of "Man, this person really pissed me off, and if they piss me off again, I'm going to tell them where to go!" It's simply, "We've got a problem here. Now what do we need to do?" I wish I could keep that attitude every day.

[The hiking experience] makes you think a lot about how important it is to try to be a better person, how you have to work at it. It makes you think about [whether] you are making the right life choices. We're not on this earth for very long. As you get older you get this heightened sense of awareness that time is passing very quickly. If you are fortunate enough to lead a long life, even at that, it's going to be gone in a second. Being out there and having all the time to just let your mind think about whatever you want--that's the greatest thing about it. You want to be constantly re-evaluating. Am I making the right life choices, and am I doing what's important?

When you take the time to be still, you realize how much there is to be gained from it. We [saw] an osprey with a fish in its mouth. You realize a lot of what you're going to experience, you can only experience by sitting still. You might have an encounter with nature while you're just walking along, and certainly we did, but walking along is disturbing. Maybe there would have been an opportunity to see a lot more had we been more still, but I prefer to be on the move.

Once I was hiking by myself in Shenandoah National Park. There was a bear off to the side of the trail, and I thought if I ever saw a bear and was by myself, I would be really scared, but he was just like doing his own thing. Mostly bears turn and run. Our experience was as soon as they see you they turn and run, but this bear was just out foraging. It was like I wasn't there. He was doing his thing, and I was doing mine. Neither one of us was bothering the other. He didn't threaten me in any way.

When we came to Max Patch it was a fall day. We came up to the top of the hill there and turned around to look across the horizon. It seemed like there was a little smoke coming out of a chimney and a valley and the leaves were different colors. The mountains were that purple color, and it was just this perfect and serene picture like you could walk into it and stay. That same day there must have been this area along a streambed where there was mountain laurel. It was very misty. You could see these fine particles of mist in the air, and you were walking through them.

On the same day, we walked across this section of trail that looked like it had been bombed out. It was some kind of national observatory, some communication center that had been put on some hillside. They literally almost took the earth and scraped it all off and stuffed this building in one corner. The trail went into this foreign piece of land

[with] just little plastic trail markers that stood up so that you would know your way from one side of it to the other. Maybe it's all filled back in over time, and we just happened to hit it right after it had been discarded like that. You had this juxtaposition between where man has come and then [what] nature has done. It makes you more appreciative of what hasn't been touched by man.

Certainly spending a lot of time in the woods draws your attention to environmental issues. I've become more interested in things that one can do to be a steward of the environment. We're very much stuck in suburbia here. It's fine, but every day more and more the woods around us are being made into housing developments. You watch all the woods around you become hundreds of houses and wish it could be different. Things are harder for me to put aside. It used to be much easier. I'll recycle this but ok, it isn't convenient for me to do that. It would just be easier for me to throw this in the trashcan. I can't easily do that anymore; I've got to do the right thing. I've got to find a way to recycle, a way to reuse. Maybe I can't make much of a difference as one person, but I can make a tiny difference. If we all make a little tiny difference, maybe it'll all add up.

It makes you think about pursuing the things that you have been putting off. For example, one of the things that I'd always been interested in doing, but didn't pursue was art. There's been this awful constant nagging thing going on. I'm coming back saying, "Is this work I should really be doing or what else could I be doing that would make a bigger difference, that would make any difference whatsoever?" Since then, this clay art that I've become involved in, a lot is inspired by nature. I like to do hand-built work, and a lot of it has kind of nature-oriented themes, leaves and acorns and trees. I'll do

something and [think], “I don’t know why I would try to reproduce nature.” You’re trying to recreate something [whose] beauty is not reproducible.

One thing that I did notice on the trail is that women in their 20s seem much more confident today than when I was in my 20s. One of the things that really impressed me about the younger generation was how the women and men seem to be more on an equal footing. That’s very empowering. [I had] this idea to make a sculpture. This sculpture [is] the front of a ship, and the name of the ship is Girl Power. It’s got this righteous looking woman on the front of it. So I don’t know if that’s part of . . . I don’t know what made me think of that. Whether people [go] out there for a weekend or a day or 6 months, people are affected in a positive way on many different levels--the physical and the mental challenge, the freedom of it all. For me, that was probably the most free I have ever felt in my life. You don’t want that to go away. You want it to be available for others.

Bernadette’s Primary Themes

Commitment to the environment, gratitude, and wanting to give service.

Summarizing the Themes

These stories were an invitation to share in the wilderness experience. The reader was also given an opportunity to listen independently for underlying themes. I replayed audiotapes of the participants’ interviews, allowing the meanings to emerge intuitively as I drew mandalas in response to what I heard. It was important to the study design to confirm the themes with the participants. Subsequently all 12 of the women verified that the identified themes accurately expressed the essence of their story. In some cases, they expanded the theme even further or added something to the list. A summary of major

themes appears below, and they constitute the gifts of wilderness. The women's subsequent additions follow the list of themes.

1. Healing and letting go, gratitude and commitment to service
2. Trust in the wilderness, appreciation of one's body, self confidence, and peace
3. Clarity of vision, identification with nature, courage, and creativity
4. Appreciation of beauty, acceptance, perseverance, and feeling alive
5. Letting go, finding oneself, independence, and gratitude
6. Real-ization, balance, contentment, and listening to your heart
7. Being present, connection, faith, and spiritual healing
8. Acceptance, trusting the process, meaning, and connection
9. Healing, experiencing nurturance, finding one's voice, and becoming whole
10. Confronting fear, becoming present, remembering one's place, and
impermanence
11. Integration, wholeness, harmony, and awe
12. Commitment to the environment, gratitude, and wanting to give service

Thematic additions or refinements of meaning were supplied by 5 of the participants. Midnight showed who I am, what's important to me, and what I want. Sirocco showed patriarchy. CicelyB showed a sense of accomplishment. Groovy showed strength. Finally, Bernadette showed responsibility.

Every experience is unique, yet a body of stories has the potential for revealing an underlying or connecting experience. Themes from the stories were categorized, allowing larger units of meaning to emerge. This process is described below. Then the initial research questions were revisited to determine how the stories informed these questions.

Data Analysis

Study Questions

The purpose of this study was to address questions about women's transformative experiences in wilderness. The questions included: (a) What is the nature of the experience of transformation that occurs in women spending an extended period of time walking in wilderness? (b) How does this experience vary from person to person? and (c) Are there aspects of transformation that unfold in the same way for everyone? Evidence related to all three questions is addressed in the following sections of this chapter.

A fourth question related to evidence of transformation in a person's creative work. McNiff (1992) argued that creative work ought to be allowed to speak for itself without verbal mediation. Submissions of the participants' creative work appear in Appendix I. About half of the participants chose to create an additional transformation image. They appear before each woman's embodied writing and story presented earlier in this chapter. The reader is encouraged to respond to these creative submissions independently.

A less overt purpose for this study was its potential for transforming all those participating, including the reader. The last section of this chapter portrays reactions to the research that were gathered from participants, the audiocassette transcriber, and two resonance panel members. Each was asked to write about the impact, if any, that the research study had on them.

Analyzing the Stories

Characteristics of transformation in wilderness have been illuminated using the women's stories, embodied writing, and visual images. Major themes in the individual

stories were compared to Clements' (2000) description of transformation. They include a change that impacts the central part of the self, one that leads to self-realization and is evidenced by an increase in self-understanding, a connection to Spirit, and a commitment to service. Other themes that have been considered qualities of transformation included an ongoing creative process (Hart, 2001), and peak experiences of awe and feelings of being graced (Maslow, 1999).

A common core of transformative themes appeared in the women's work, although each person's journey was unique. The first step in analyzing the data consisted of identifying three or four primary themes from each woman's story. Three rounds of reading and listening to the stories were followed by a period of meditative walking. The next step was the creation of a mandala for each story using colored markers and pencils or oil pastels. It led to the identification of 50 primary themes in the stories. Using a process of inductive analysis, the themes were grouped into eight larger categories. They are listed below. Some themes appeared multiple times. If a theme appeared more than once, the number of appearances is noted in parenthesis following the theme. Some words within a given category seem nearly identical. If slightly different words emerged during the analysis, no attempt was made to change them.

Category 1: Experiencing a deep connection within the self, with others, and with the environment

integration	connection (2)
wholeness	healing (2)
harmony	becoming whole
identification with nature	
balance	

Category 2: Feeling competent

facing fear (2)	independence
-----------------	--------------

self confidence
courage

perseverance
finding one's voice

Category 3: Trusting

letting go (2)
acceptance
feeling nurtured
trusting the process
faith

trusting wilderness
peace
acceptance
contentment

Category 4: A sense of presence

being present (2)
clarity of vision
realization

recognition of impermanence

Category 5: Becoming an authentic self

finding oneself
remembering one's place
listening to the heart
finding meaning

Category 6: Desiring to be of service

commitment to the environment
service (2)
gratitude

Category 7: Experiencing a sense of wonder

appreciation of beauty
awe
feeling alive

Category 8: creativity

creativity
inspiration
invention

Verifying Transformational Themes

Characteristics of transformation from Clements (2000), Hart (2001), and Maslow (1999) were compared to the thematic categories. The process was helpful in ascertaining whether the participants' experiences were consistent with characteristics of transformation. Referencing Clements' (2000), (a) there was a greater integration of self (10 themes relate) that included feelings of competence (7 themes relate); (b) there was "a sense of presence" or a spiritual connection (5 themes relate) that included an ability to trust (10 themes relate) in something greater than themselves; and (c) there was a commitment to "service" (4 themes). The latter appeared in almost every story, though it was not always a primary theme.

Other recurring themes included a sense of wonder, a quality related to peak experiences more common in self actualizing people (Maslow, 1999), and an enhanced sense of creative energy. Many of the women spoke of these inner changes as an ongoing process.

Analyzing Embodied Writing

The wilderness setting for the women's transformation was a critical component of this research. How did they experience wilderness? To aid the reader in understanding the inner and outer landscape, the women were asked to engage in embodied writing and write about a time when they felt especially close to nature on their hike on the A.T. These unedited embodied writing pieces appear with the women's stories at the beginning of this chapter. They provide verbal snapshots that invite the vicarious participation of the reader in the unfolding of a wilderness-based experience in all of its embodied, sensual detail.

After repetitive readings of the embodied writing, 12 common themes emerged. These themes, listed below, further illuminate the nature of the relationship between the writers and the wilderness in which psychospiritual transformation took place.

1. Encountering the embodied feminine

I try to fix things, rearrange them, make beauty out of chaos, try to put the horrific imbalance I experience around me back en pointe. But here I see I don't need to make anything. It's already here and I'm ok with that. (Sirocco)

[T]he mother [bear] emerges from the thick woods, stopping right on the trail. She is quickly making movements that make the cubs go straight up the tree. (Sisu)

Can they see me naked? I don't think so, but I am proud of my body. (Bernadette)

2. Dissolving boundaries between the self and the wild

But now I am breathing green. In and out, no filter. I think my blood is no longer red but green, full of chlorophyll. (Sirocco)

My attitude and psyche are at odds with this glorious fall day, and it sucks! I struggle with the morning, fully aware of how out of sync I am with the surroundings. (Groovy)

I can feel its presence, and I can hear it calling me. I have seen it a million times in my mind over the last 6 months, and today is the day I will meet it face to face, Mt. Katahdin, the object of my desire. (Midnight)

3. Experiencing acceptance

I feel no need to make anything. I try to fix things, rearrange them, make beauty out of chaos, but here I see I don't need to make anything. It's already here, and I'm okay with that. (Sirocco)

I lay down in the bed of leaves beside the trail in a circle of sunshine. On my back, splayed in the forest, I close my eyes and begin to cry. (Groovy)

4. Being in relationship

I have been out of the fragrant, balsam firs that have been my companions for days. (CicelyB)

Now I see a black bear cub. And the first thing I am thinking is, "Oh, there's a cub." Not a reaction of fright or fear, but just a reaction that I knew it was here and I am here. (Sisu)

[The bears] are not moving, but her cubs have been crying, sounding almost like a human child. I realize I am no longer a creature that only visits the woods, but this is my home just as it is the bears'. (Sisu)

Today I will embrace the mountain in this final climb. But first I must wait for the first rays of the sun to show me the way to the mountain of my dreams.
(Midnight)

The trees are pulling me upward, now the rocks, the iron hand holds. Can I get up them alone? How is it that the rocks are so flat and welcoming to my feet? A crow, a crow hangs in the thermal just off the peak of Katahdin. Thank-you. A sign. Alone is not alone. (Buzz)

A tortoise under a brown and amber shell appears at the edge of the plaque just as I lift my foot for the final step. She under her shell and I under my pack cross the finish line together. (GottaHike!)

5. Everything as it should be

I imagine the hand of God at the top of the mountain. It is a large hand that is cupped and holding a handful of rocks and boulders. The hand tips and the rocks are falling out and running down the side of the mountain--each rock stopping in its designated place. (Bernadette)

The rain and thunder come and go, but I don't mind. All is well with the world.
(Jamie)

I feel happy and comfortable with the weather and its varied changes. (Cadence)

6. Connected

I gradually feel aware of a kind of felt presence--a spiritual presence--and a sort of knowing conveying that I will complete my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail this year. (Cadence)

And I think no boundary. This is what this is. I feel at this moment--and I mean feel--in my body--how much energy is spent in blocking the visual ugliness of our world: the insensitive WalMart. (Sirocco)

Learning to listen to my body, my thoughts, my intuition, my needs, has been liberating. (GottaHike!)

7. Challenging

So cold. I have to keep moving to get warm. The trees are frozen now and hanging down, making them tough obstacles to push past. (Heidi)

Sore and tired, I shuffle downward with my knees aching with each jarring step. Planting my poles solidly to erase the pain, head down against the ever-present drizzle of rain, I am making progress. (CicelyB)

8. Trustworthy

I trust the trees, the grass, the flowers, and a hill are in the wilderness beyond the loft window. (Nuppi)

9. Sensual

The late afternoon breeze is so delicious. I can taste the crispness in the air. I feel a gentle movement across my face. (Nuppi)

Two inches from my muddy tip is a morel mushroom. I gasp, reach down, and pluck the delicious treat. (CicelyB)

She is smelling the air strongly. I can smell her, too. She smells like wet fur, but with lots of earthy smells like dirt and leaves. (Sisu)

Much like the previous days, this one is unusually warm, the air velvety soft against my skin. (Groovy)

Small patches of blue so deep and rich it feels like velvet; a canopy of bright, yellow leaves tinged with green and brown; warm sun on my face, my hands, my legs. (Groovy)

I stare up at the clear sky filled with stars and the most beautiful full moon I have ever seen. (Midnight)

10. Vast

I am a small, insignificant part of the world compared to the 1812 overture. (Jamie)

11. Timeless

Time is standing still. The wind is all I hear, eerie yet serene. Heart pounding, but I can't feel my legs. Am I tired? (Buzz)

12. Ever-changing

[T]he heavens once again open, and a thunderstorm rumbles in. I will not miss the sudden thunderstorms! (GottaHike!)

Creating the Group Story

Organic inquiry encourages an emersion by the primary researcher in individual participants' stories to discern their underlying connections. Through deep encounters with these stories, personal experience, and researcher intuition, a larger, group story ultimately emerged. A harbinger of the group's story appeared during my participation in a shamanic retreat. The leader encouraged me to pose my important questions to nature and then listen for an answer. As I walked through the forest, I was drawn to a downward swirling fungus, a circular acorn top, and a succulent green plant with opposing leaves that met at the stem.

These images from nature came to symbolize my personal inner journey and subsequent rebirth. A sense of profound uncertainty had taken over for months following departure from my first doctoral studies program. It seemed that there was no alternative but submission to the dark forces that pulled me down into grief, anger, and loss. Even then, something was stirring, swirling through my dreams and erupting in wildly pulsing emotions like the concentric circles that caught my eye in the acorn's cap. Deep within, a small green shoot of authenticity was waiting to be born. Its force began gathering disparate aspects of myself I'd been unwilling to embrace. Ultimately this synergy would birth a being that was strong and whole.

Virtually all of the women in this study had entered midlife when they walked the trail and/or when they were interviewed. Washburn (2003) referred to the inward turn of the personality at midlife as *the crossroads*. Gauthier (2003) explored this midlife period

and called it the transvaluation experience. She makes reference to the myth of Innana in her work, describing the role of myths in the midlife journey.

I too was drawn to the myth of Innana (Gauthier, 2003; Taylor, 1996). After analyzing the individual stories and writing an initial version of a group story, I felt strongly that this myth was a unifying template for the women's story of transformation. Innana seemed a fitting A.T. patron because she is sometimes referred to as the Goddess of Thunderstorms and Rain (Jacobsen, 1976). For many an A.T. thru-hiker, thunder and lightening commanded attention, illuminating everything as it united earth and sky.

The myth of Innana is a tale of rebirth (Gauthier, 2003; Taylor, 1996) or a story of transformation. Innana willingly sinks into the depths of a dark underworld in search of her lost sister. The tale mirrors a woman's journey into an inner darkness to retrieve the lost parts of herself. To retrieve what is lost, Innana is required to remove all her veils. Likewise, a woman must cast aside her masks and illusions and look into her own naked soul. In this tale, a grieving and angry Ereshkigal agrees to release her sister's corpse only after receiving the gift of compassion. Innana is subsequently reborn, freed to return to the realm of the living as a powerful and wise queen. In these stories I heard a similar tale, the search for something lost or abandoned.

The group's story based on this myth was presented orally to a gathering of 11 of the 12 research women to determine its resonance with their experience. A 12th woman received the story in writing and sent me her reaction. All of the participants agreed that the group story was an accurate representation of their transformation. The story proceeds through the following stages: 1.) Beginning in darkness; 2.) At the crossroads; 3.) The

descent; 4.) Experiencing compassion; 5.) Retrieving the embodied self; 6.) Coming home.

Group Story: The A.T. Experience as a Tale of Descent and Rebirth

Beginning in darkness. The women's journeys began in metaphorical and sometimes literal darkness, in an underworld of lost selves, the inner wilderness. Unresolved issues were often a part of the journey. I heard how personal dreams had been shelved, how unwelcome feelings had been denied to please others, how the playfulness and power of strong bodies had been stuffed into clean clothes and kept quiet, how daughters had tried to be sons, and how women had abandoned a connection to their own sexuality to please others. To risk being authentic, to honor one's deepest desire, was to risk losing love. It required extraordinary courage to stand up for oneself, to stand on one's own. Choosing to make the journey represented a new level of independence and self-reliance for these women. In that sense it represented a reclaiming of their lives, their power, and their voice.

Buzz described her feelings as she left for the trail alone.

I had been raised to be controlled by guilt, shame, and fear. I was afraid of most things, except the things that had a script so I knew what to do. I left in the dark on the train. Here I am taking off in the dark. I got to Atlanta and had to get my way to the train station. The guy who was supposed to pick me up didn't show up and all of that stuff. I got started.

Their dreams of a thru-hike had often been postponed for years as they honored the demands of relationships and family expectations. GottaHike! and Nuppi raised children. Midnight tried to be a dutiful wife. Bernadette, Groovy, Buzz, and Sirocco were deeply involved in the responsibilities of the world of work. The focus was on the practical and/or the demands of relationship.

At the crossroads. As early as age 30, they began to turn inward on a journey to the self. Washburn (2003) described *the crossroads* as a decision point, marking a departure from a previous way of being. It can lead developmentally beyond the mature ego to a reconnection with the Self. For many of these women, entering *the crossroads* meant standing up for the first time to the desires and opinions of others. Groovy's husband and Buzz's partner did not want them to go. Jamie's hike represented a first step in taking responsibility for her own happiness. She had never seriously considered what was right for her. To do so meant risking the disapproval of her father.

I was the fourth of five kids. The plan [was] to go to college and get a good job, and it wouldn't be in the artsy world. It would be in the math/science world. I lived with a guy for a while. When I split up with him, it dawned on me that unless I did something for myself, if I was waiting to meet somebody who did what I enjoyed doing, I was a fool.

Discontinuities in their life trajectories often contributed to making the hike a reality. Buzz was without a job for the first time in her working life. Heidi's husband asked for a divorce, and she was frightened at the prospect of taking care of herself. Nuppi left her secure teaching job to join a new partner in another city. Bernadette's career began to feel stale. CicelyB found the time for a break was finally right when her son left home. "I did this hike when my son was in college, and I guess he's basically gone off on his own."

Wilderness removed their traditional sense of security by temporarily severing their connection with the past. Nuppi explained what it was like to give it all up and experience the sense of freedom. "I quit my job, sold my house, left my community, my kids were gone. That was a lot to leave. I could do the trail."

Washburn (2003) referred to this stage of inward turning as the crossroads.

Sirocco reflected on awareness of the change. The trail became her ritual for turning.

The spine of the book is how I see the trail. I see it as mid-life. I was going up in my life. Hiking the trail became the spine of that book, and now I'm hiking down. I designed the trail as a ritual to reach that other side, and it actually did happen.

It was not a decision taken lightly. The women struggled with sleet, snow, heat and cold, rocks and roots, thunder and lightening on the trail. Nature could seem cruel. They were forced to drop any masks or illusions and keep moving forward. Heidi described the trail as a great leveler. Regardless of status, education, or income, all hikers were faced with the same challenges.

They described experiencing a darkness within and without. During the hours of solitary walking each day, it was hard to find distraction from what was in their heads. In their descent into a personal underworld, they opened to long abandoned feelings and old wounds that waited in their minds and hearts. Most spoke of reviewing their past. Nuppi recalled a loss of trust when her parent's divorced and her deep inner wounding from the taunts of classmates.

I was in the fifth grade when my mom told me they were going to get this divorce. The kids quit speaking to me. I was a really fat kid. I've battled weight all the time, and I have an eating disorder that I didn't recognize. I just knew I was a really fat kid.

Several felt varying degrees of alienation from their embodied selves as a result of past painful experiences. Two women described a marked disconnection. Groovy's rape was so emotionally and spiritually traumatic that she no longer went walking. She couldn't even read about the A.T.

When I was 16 years old [when] a group of friends and I, three girls and myself who were in high school together, decided that we were going to take a 2 week backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail. Three nights into that trip we were

attacked at our campsite that was set on a beautiful mountain. At least five local men raped and threatened to kill us. We escaped with our lives.

Midnight starved herself as if trying to escape from her body itself. She struggled to reclaim her life before heading for the trail.

My body has always been something of a--I guess I never respected it much. I was always very active and sports minded, very physically fit. I don't know if there was something along those lines with the eating disorder. I should be dead.

Traveling light meant letting go, relinquishing possessions and jobs, and even relationships. Belongings were reduced to what they could carry on their backs while trail friendships became precious. In the tradition of A.T. thru-hikers, they received or took new names. Buzz even decided to remove her hair, a traditional cultural symbol of femininity.

I had always wanted to shave my head. Now I don't know what that's about, but my hair had been real long when I was a little kid. When my younger brother came along, my father had to start taking care of me. My hair got short real fast because he couldn't braid. So I thought heck this will be perfect. I won't see anybody for 6 months, and I won't have to think about washing my hair.

The descent. For months the women's focus was inward. In their descent into a personal underworld of reverie and sometimes sadness, they began opening to long abandoned feelings and old wounds that found a place in their hearts and minds. They negotiated an endless tunnel of green that led them downward toward a lost self. The views were infrequent and the distractions few. During the first stage of the hike, they still tried to manage relationships with those at home. It consumed a lot of energy and then became impossible. GottaHike! expressed it well.

I was distracted by trying to keep relationships--figure out how to do this hike and still keep my relationships with other people, with my family and people who wanted to join me and people who were supporting me--how to keep those intact and whether I should keep those intact.

The solitary nature of walking and the rigors of the trail gradually broke through their resistance, and they faced their self-illusions and their fears. Sisu believed her husband would support her through all of this, but he left her to find her own way. She found the experience emotionally devastating.

Here I am supposed to be having a beautiful “at one with nature” experience, and I feel like I’m just dying. I felt I was losing the connection with the person that I’ve devoted my life to, my husband.

I started breaking down. Another hiker happened to be going southbound that day. She looked at me and said, “Sisu, are you okay?” And I said, “No, I’m not.” At that point I’d never admitted to anybody I wasn’t okay. Slowly I was letting some parts of me just let go, let go of those circumstances and just say, “I can’t do a lot of these things anymore.”

As they continued to let go of the past, several described emotional catharsis. The women cried in pain, at the ending of relationships, and in the face of beauty. Buzz, Jamie, and Groovy gradually let go of relationships that had been less than positive. Buzz found a tearful opening of the body preceded the release of a destructive relationship.

It was 98 degrees out, and I was doing the roller coaster section. I sat in the middle of the trail and cried and said, “I cannot do this. I just can’t do this. I’m going to die. I can’t do this.” I never cried out loud before I went hiking. I went about half a mile up the trail, and this guy that I had been hiking near was sitting there crying because it was so hot. I thought, “At least it isn’t a girl thing.”

I cried hysterically a lot of the southern half. I’d be walking along thinking about things and replaying events over the 19 years in this relationship, and I’d be bawling.

Experiencing compassion. They were cared for and comforted by strangers. These experiences seemed to engender a renewal of faith. They also reminded them of their unconditional value. On most nights the women met a group of fellow thru-hikers with whom they shared stories and sometimes food. They were encouraged, fed, transported, and befriended by people they did not know. This was healing and a departure from the

relationships they had experienced in the past. Nuppi contrasted trail encounters with her family relationships.

Your own blood family is supposed to be there. They're not. Other people just appeared. You'd meet three women in a group. One person said, "When you get to New Jersey, call me up and I'll give you a place to stay. I get to New Jersey, and I'm out of food. I call her up and say, "Remember me?" She said, "I've taken some time off. Where are you?"

I had a lot of abuse issues that I worked out in therapy. Here are all these men in shelters and never once did a man do anything inappropriate. I was amazed. They were kind and nice.

Heidi found that the trail itself became her friend, dependable and always there.

Retrieving the embodied self. The old self began to die, and the women discovered new qualities in themselves. A renewed connection with their bodies often required a revision in self-concept. Meeting the rigors of the trail helped them feel strong and invincible. GottaHike! had given up on the image of herself as an athlete as she entered adolescence. Her A.T. experience allowed her to celebrate her body again. Cadence could no longer see herself as a cancer victim. Groovy discovered that her body could provide a sense of freedom.

Sometimes when I'm hiking--I've become very conscious of my body and all the things that it allows me to do, and I've become very thankful for it. I thank my legs for carrying me to places I love to go and thank all my senses for bringing the world inside me and allowing me to experience it.

Several women mentioned a rebirth of intuition and a renewed sense of trust in themselves.

[The third part of the hike was] where the real transformation took place, when I came to really trust myself and my environment and trust my intuition and give myself permission to experience it all in the present, being present for everything that was happening. (GottaHike!)

I am much more in tune with my intuitive understandings of situations and people, trust my perceptions, and am not afraid to act on them. I am more

outspoken especially when passionate about an issue and am not afraid to speak the truth as I know it. (GottaHike!)

I found I could trust my gut sense again. It never steered me wrong. That's good for your sense of self, being able to trust what you need to do next in your life or how you need to be in your life or what's really important. (Cadence)

Experiencing rebirth: An enhance sense of self. The women evidence a new level of self-acceptance, as if having met and honored themselves for the first time. They no longer needed to please others at the expense of self.

I think that hearing my own voice and listening to that voice and honoring that voice has become much more important, choosing the direction, the paths that I want to travel in my life and being more thoughtful about it. (Groovy)

I'd always been a very easy going what happens, happens kind of person. That was exacerbated after my hike. Things used to eat at me a little. After you're a hiker, you get into if it's meant to be, it's meant to be. (CicelyB)

I didn't become a different person as a result of my experience, but I'm a person more in touch with who I always wanted to be and who I always thought I was and could be. It helped me to really become more in touch with that person. (GottaHike!)

Midnight came to know herself in a deep way. Groovy and Midnight spoke of their experience as an awakening.

I think it's something that I never thought that I would actually know. I was supposed to be everything else to everybody else and just go through the motions. (Midnight)

I had an epiphany a couple of years ago and realized this is not the life I'm supposed to be living. I felt I was not in the correct life or that I was living an alternate life. Having come to that realization, I am taking steps. (Groovy)

The boundary between self and world dissolved after their long immersion in the natural world. It was expressed as an experience of oneness with nature.

For about a year after the trail, I was still aware of that green breath. I was always aware of a parallel existence, not even of other people, but of the earth breathing and chlorophyll and sky and weather and the passing of the seasons and pulsing. (Sirocco)

It included a sense of well-being and a decrease in the need for control. There was a growing attunement and appreciation of the natural world and the rhythm of change.

Prior to doing the trail, if I had to walk in darkness, it would be very uncomfortable. Now it doesn't bother me at all. I barely use a flashlight on a trip anymore. I don't feel that the big world is around me, and it's all dark, and I don't know what's out there. Now I'm part of it. (Jamie)

I love the fact that [nature] can throw up tornadoes and storms and lightening and man with all his planning, control issues, and hypertechnology just has to stop and adjust. You realize you can't control everything and it's not a good thing to even try to do that. (Cadence)

Whatever is going on, whether it's really good or bad, it isn't going to last for long. If it's good, enjoy it. And if it's not, slog through it and wait for the next thing to happen. The weather will change, the terrain will change, the people will change, and your blisters will change. Be reasonably prepared, do your best, and see what happens. (Buzz)

A deep sense of connection with wilderness and with themselves was evidenced.

The world was their home, and it brought them a sense of ease.

I think that during my hike I had a lot of moments of feeling just truly blessed with being out there and feeling very connected with what was out there and connected to myself. (Groovy)

In some ways the walk was like a coming home, being able to actually experience that. I think of times in my life that have just been unbearable. It's always been nature that has grounded me and made sense of things again. (Cadence)

It was so exceptional to feel so at home and in harmony with all that was around me, tiny speck in the universe though I may be. (GottaHike!)

Along with a renewed sense of personal integration, there emerged an enhanced sense of self-reliance and trust in self. Sisu was frightened of many things when her hike began. She confronted her fears alone in Maine. Groovy felt joy in her newfound independence.

I just started walking south and I felt so free. It was the best decision I'd made. All of a sudden the woods looked so cool. I thought it was the most fantastic place

that I was in. That was my first decision maybe as an adult that was mine. It was my decision to say I can't do that and it's okay to say no. (Sisu)

[I was] becoming more of a whole person, a whole self. It was kind of like growing up for me, separating myself and becoming responsible for my own actions when I'd made the decision that that was what I was going to do. It's much more important for me to honor myself than to honor what other people want me to do or don't want me to do. (Groovy)

The sense of connectedness was experienced as a spiritual experience.

I think with some of the challenges I've been through in my life, it's been really easy for me to disconnect with the sense of knowing both myself or a spiritual presence. The further I walked--I just had this sense and this presence like a spiritual presence that this is fine. You just keep going. (Cadence)

The experience included a sense of feeling truly alive, aware, and present in the moment in a way they had not experienced before.

I kept a journal. To go back and read that journal, each day is so vivid, not every moment, but you remember it. I think of this other life. What were you doing 4 weeks ago, 4 months ago? Everything was so vivid. (CicelyB)

All you need to do is walk here and be present. (Cadence)

Coming home. The women had walked more than 2,000 miles over the tops of mountains in all kinds of weather before returning to the homes they left. At least one full year had passed when they reflected on their experiences. They expressed gratitude for the wilderness' gifts of endless beauty. GottaHike! felt in harmony with the earth: the trees, the stars, the birds, the rivers, the flowers, and the animals. There were expressions of appreciation for nature including their physical and emotional selves.

When I was coming of age and you're in those awkward teenage years, you do this comparison thing. It was worse then, and it gradually gets better, but I really think it got better on the trail, accepting myself, who I am. This is the perfect foot for hiking. (Heidi)

I like the physical feeling that [hiking] gives me because it makes my body feel like it is being used. (Jamie)

I came to be present to myself in every respect: my body, my emotions, my intellect, my feeling of being in touch, in harmony with that part of the universe, part of other people, part of a tree. I didn't feel like I needed to explain that to anybody or even to myself because I knew it was right for me. (GottaHike!)

As a result of their experience, they spoke of a greater sense of authenticity, confidence, and being true to oneself.

I spent more of my life before hiking the trail up in a corner watching myself. [I was] trying to figure out all the ways the situation should go so that I would be some place that wouldn't make anybody mad. By the end of the trail, I wouldn't say as I was wholly there, but a whole lot more. (Buzz)

My confidence has changed. People that knew me before the trail think that aliens captured me and somebody else was brought down. There was a time when I could sit in a room with someone that I had absolutely no interest in talking to, and I would sit there because I thought that was the proper thing to do. I don't do that anymore. (Midnight)

Their post-trail lives included an emphasis on simplicity and earth friendly values.

The women showed a diminished interest in high status jobs or a desire to acquire material possessions.

One of the hardest things was quitting my job because I wasn't brought up to do that. [The trail] taught me that money is not the most important thing. I took a job that was a 33% pay cut and loved it, did it for 9 years. (Jamie)

People get caught up in all the stuff like they've got to make so much money. They're lives just go with no control, without stopping and enjoying. I could get a real job and earn money and do what normal people do. I don't know that I can. I just want to be free to go where I want to go and when I want to go. I live poor, but I don't want to be strapped to a job. (Heidi)

When I first got home, [I'd] been living in this very small backpack for 6 months and realizing that was really all [I] needed. I live in a very big house with a walk-in attic, married to a pack rat, have lots of stuff--comfortably middle/upper middle class, so accumulated. I got into a frenzy of why do I have all this crap? (CicelyB)

The things that matter to me now are the love of my family; and accepting that I need food, shelter, water; and if I've got love, that's all I need. I didn't perceive that before. I'm glad I realized that life can be so simple if I allow it to be. (Sisu)

There was evidence of a general rebirth in personal creativity when they returned home. Some women embraced new life work and/or expressed a desire to give back to others in gratitude for all they received.

I've come to realize that I am a very creative person after spending many years saying I am not. I can look at a piece of land and design a water feature and a garden. I like soil and water, thunderstorms and the ocean. (Nuppi)

I'm considering starting my own business. I think I have a very viable and creative business idea that I hope to put into action sometime later this year or early next. (Groovy)

I was sick of working for other people. I wanted to have time to do my own artwork and [have] control over my own schedule. I think doing the thru-hike gave me the spine to be able to do that. (Sirocco)

I was aware that we have this incredible exuberance and zest for life that doesn't match people around us. That's what I found, and it didn't fade. I certainly found I was carrying it. People wanted to be around that. (Cadence)

Our hike in August coincided with my book's rebirth in the hands of a publisher. I am hopeful that the book will inspire other women, particularly older women who have spent most of their adult lives serving the needs of others, to act on a dormant dream. I hope they'll read my book and give themselves permission to act on their dream. (GottaHike!)

Their gratitude included a commitment to the environment that grew out of a relationship with wilderness. An environmental ethic emerged and showed itself in both the personal and political arenas.

What matters to me is the earth. I work with mostly environmental groups as a grant writer. A lot of the things that matter to me I see as not valued in the culture. (Sirocco)

I feel responsible for a lot of things now. I'm responsible for the land that I live on, the things that I use. I'm more conscious of that. . . . I need to give my heart and love to the things I feel passionately about. Whether it's bringing in some recycling for somebody because they didn't even think about it [or] riding my bike to work. . . . Deeply knowing the lay of the land has changed me. (Sisu)

I have a big thing about reusing things, plastic bags, Ziplock bags. I hate it when people throw away a perfectly good Zip-lock bag because where is it going to go? I don't know where all the garbage goes. (Jamie)

If I have a regret from before the hike, [it] is that I was not environmentally aware. I feel a connection to the earth. I feel that's where I came from. I feel this connection to take care of it, to protect and preserve it. This is where I am at peace. (Midnight)

I think the thing I'm struggling with most is also clearest--just how we live on the planet. I can't live like most people do anymore. I just can't do it. It just tears you apart how much we consume. (Cadence)

These changes have been lasting. The women continued to spend as much time as possible outside, restructuring their lives to make this possible.

I don't think a career--it doesn't matter anymore to me. It's kind of been there, done it, got the t-shirt. I would just like to figure a way to get back in the woods more. (Buzz)

I just love the feeling that it gives me when I'm out in the woods. You always feel at peace with yourself. Even if you're hot or struggling or huffing and puffing, it's just such a good feeling. It's just you know you're alive. (CicelyB)

You're standing in the Grayson Highlands and you look out and there's just this ocean of blue, undulating mountains as far as you can see all the way around. My God, this place exists! This calm place exists in the midst of all this other craziness around it. So [there is] the sense that you don't have to go there to get it; you carry it with you. (Buzz)

Transformational Impact of the Research

An important component of organic research is the potential of story telling to illicit meaning from experience. Dufrechu (2003) found that experiences of transformation were amplified when an individual had the opportunity to put his or her experience into words. Indeed, in this study, the participants frequently spoke of the importance of having someone really listen to their story and of how rare such an opportunity was for them. The mutual sharing of stories during the group gathering was powerful as the women heard their experiences resonating in the words of others. The

women were asked to respond in writing about the impact that participation in the research had on them. Some of their responses are listed below.

Impact on the Participants

Participating in the research itself has been transforming. Prior to being interviewed, I wasn't wholly aware or appreciative of all the ways my A.T. experience changed me. As the hike and time since I finished is done, the research has had an inward, introspective effect on me. I have been connected to other strong women, people who have chosen a path similar to mine for countless different reasons. Being a participant has given me a renewed sense of pride in my accomplishments and in myself including feelings of pride in connection with a community of empowered women. (Groovy)

It helped to pause and reflect again on the experience itself and reaffirm its value in my life. It gave me the opportunity to meet other women hikers who I never encountered on my thru-hike and to connect with them in ways I could not while hiking. It reminded me of the value of my hike and helped me celebrate my transformation into a strong, radiant, tough, complex, and delicate being. (GottaHike!)

Every time I read my writing, I feel it all, all over my body, mind--close my eyes and see it all--cry, laugh, smile, shake, and remember. Remember the effort of which I am capable, remember the people who helped me at some step along the way, make the faint notion clear and real. When I read my interview, I thought, "God, no wonder some folks have no idea what I'm saying." Linear I am not. Organic, open, in process, vulnerable, awakening--that I am. When I am not, I know some fear is holding me back. I have learned to lean into my vulnerability, lift and expose my heart. Now to learn how to expose my back--my last fears. To live fearlessly is the aim. This project reminds me of the aim. (Buzz)

It has allowed me to express myself. It has validated the truth about my purpose for doing the trail. Participation completed a spiral in my journey. I am more relaxed, secure, and able to trust. (Nuppi)

Impact on the Researcher

As the researcher, listening to the stories can only be described as a timeless experience for me. It sometimes felt like an alternation in consciousness. Throughout the process of interviewing, I was deeply moved to consider my own life and its meaning. I

felt deeply honored to be entrusted with the listening experience. My reactions to the storytelling experiences appear in the researcher journal in chapter 5.

Impact on the Audiocassette Transcriber

Many people were touched by these stories during the research process. The audiocassette transcriber listened to every story and subsequently wrote her reaction to that experience.

After transcribing the last of the 12 interviews, I was actually emotionally drained and depressed for the longest time. I found myself crying at the slightest provocation and felt a strong desire to leave everything behind and start out on a fresh journey of my own . . . I became disenchanted with my daily routines and surroundings. I took inventory of the clutter that surrounded me. The Salvation Army became the recipient of dozens of boxes of clothing and articles that no longer had any meaning to me. I longed for an escape into the wilderness . . . For some time now, I have felt the need to make some changes in my lifestyle, to live a simpler, more fulfilling life focusing more on myself, my family, friends, and my Jewish faith. These A.T. women are all very inspiring and have given me the impetus to make these changes now rather than later.

Impact on the Resonance Panel

In addition, two women A.T. thru-hikers who did not participate in the study volunteered to read the edited stories. They became a resonance panel for the study, and they responded with their reactions in writing.

Member #1

I'm sitting here crying. This damn trail wells up and continues to touch me and transform me. My divorce is all about that. I've been so angry since I got back in the fall of 2002. So much of that was at my husband and myself for having to go back to the damn job to work to support us and to give him health insurance. This spring I said I wasn't going to do it anymore. I had to strip off my own layers and find myself again. I sure don't have half of Buzz's insight, but I do have my story and I know I came home a completely different person. Some of it hasn't manifested in very positive ways, but I'm hoping that will change when the anger leaves. Some of it already has. I no longer think my responsibility is to take care of my husband. It's up to him.

Member #2

In all the stories there were three themes that appeared frequently and with which I identified. I think that the realization of these items is transformative. The three items were:

1. The unexpected and amazing kindness of people. I was continually being helped by people who had no reason to help me, and I particularly noticed how big a difference someone doing a small thing for you could make. I came off the trail hoping I would remember the experience and try to make a point of doing for others in the non-trail world these small helpful things.
2. An increased sense of strength and confidence. I always used to think when I was backpacking that people would look at me and think, "That five foot tall woman can't possibly know how to light a stove, etc." Now any hike or trip I go on, all I have to say is that I hiked the A.T. and I have instant credibility. It is a notable change for me.
3. Losing interest in material things. I almost never go shopping for clothes anymore. I have a 3-year-old pair of falling apart gym shoes that I keep thinking I need to replace. And I care a lot less about appearance. When you cut loose of stuff, you have more options in life. It becomes easier to move around.

Summary of Respondents' Remarks

It seems fair to conclude that exposure to the A.T. stories resonated with the non-participating A.T. hiker resonance panel and helped them reconnect with life changes that began during their walk. The experience was characterized as transformative by the transcriber. She had the opportunity to hear the stories without editing, and her remarks indicate that she was profoundly moved. Hearing the stories led her to make changes in her life.

Impact on the Reader

The reader is the final destination for stories of transformation in Organic Inquiry. Each reader is invited to consider the impact the stories have on his or her own life. Organic research is intended to be transformative. Evidence of this quality is a measure

of its validity. Three women without direct connections to this study were asked to read the stories and offer their responses.

Reader #1 was moved by the women's courage. The stories prompted her to successfully pursue a goal she once thought unattainable.

What astonished me were the many different types of courage I discovered in these women: the courage to leave hearth and home, family and friends to attempt and succeed at something that meant a great deal to each of them but was a mystery to many of the people close to them; the courage to be alone in the wilderness, dependent only upon themselves for food, lodging, warmth, very often company, their continuing existence; the courage to persevere when the going was rough or cold or wet or painful; the courage to trust completely total strangers; the courage to look inward and truthfully examine themselves and their lives and their determination to live the life-altering discoveries they made about themselves; the courage to live their lives honoring Mother Earth. . . . Most of the tears I shed were tears of joy for them.

Reader #2 noted a truthful quality in the stories. Reading them moved her to reconsider her own life and to reflect on the difficulty of truly listening to her inner voice.

Not only did the women's experiences transform them, but their stories caused me to reflect, to react, to see a possibility of transformation in myself. . . . I found that . . . themes of transformation, self-realization, and seeing the potential for a different sort of life were common, all shared similar outcomes. . . . [A]ll had descriptions of difficulties and joys so vivid as to be contagious.

We come from a generation that values women who do not cause undue discomfort in others, whether in the workplace, the social scene, or the family. The thought of doing what we want to do rather than what others want us to do is an alien one.

Reader #3 qualified her comments by disclosing a connection to one of the study participants. She traveled to parts of the A.T. and experienced its mystical qualities firsthand as well as through these stories.

I am the domestic partner of one of the women who was interviewed for the dissertation. I am not an objective observer. I was an integral part of her support system when she hiked the Appalachian Trail. I drove to Maine for the last 100 miles of her hike. We slack packed the last 100 miles. She hiked. I drove the van and picked her up at the end of the day at which time we either camped or stayed

in hostels or bed and breakfast establishments. She and I continue to marvel at the fact that even on poorly marked log roads in the Maine wilderness, we were always able to find each other. That fact alone is its own kind of trail magic.

Perhaps the “trail character” is a spiritual being. As I read the hikers’ stories, the trail seems to be a magic place, reminding me of the musical *Brigadoon*, about a magical Scottish village that appears out of the Scottish mist once every 100 years only to disappear after one day. While the trail does not disappear, it seems to have an existence all its own--separate from the complexities of “real” life, offering only earth, fire, air and water, and all the creatures that thrive on those elements--challenging these foreign creatures, civilized human beings, to enter its world of pain and blessing and daring them to survive and prevail.

Like the first reader, she was touched by their courage. Would readers have remarked on this quality had the stories been written by men? Are women generally considered fearful? The challenges presented as a result of having to walk alone through the wilderness were an opportunity to claim a part of a female self that is seldom acknowledged by this culture. These women demonstrated courage in the face of their physical trials but more significantly, they willingly entered into silence and embraced their fears.

As I think of the courage displayed by the women thru hikers, I am reminded of a quotation from a poem called *God Knows*, written by Minnie Louise Haskins in Bristol, England in 1908. She wrote, “And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.” And he replied: “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

Early reader responses, written by women, suggest that the stories provide an opening into a larger realm of being. The stories were experienced by them as transformational.

Chapter 5: Research Journal

Introduction

This research journal contains a chronological description of my exploration of wilderness and transformation during the conduct of this study. The events unfolded over a period of about three years. These entries may help to provide a frame of reference for readers as they engage the stories. Researcher biases and preconceptions will become transparent here, as each of us begins with a frame of reference. As I listened to transformation stories and engaged in the practice of organic research, the process itself became transformative for me. I share my personal experiences here in hopes of providing another window of understanding for the reader. By drawing deeply on these, I have been better able to lean gently into the nature of transformation in wilderness as it unfolded for the women in this study.

Fall, 2003

In my dream I dive into the water to retrieve a dead woman's body that is wrapped in a light blue shroud. The blue is a color I associate with Mary, the Virgin Mother. In my dream other women are playing on the water in kayaks, but I must dive in and am really afraid. I reach for the shroud under the dark shadows of a bridge and retrieve the bag for an unnamed man standing on the shore.

Φ

My body is beginning to thaw. I feel strange and overwhelmingly erotic feelings that consume me. I am filled with love and recognize that love is the meaning of everything.

Φ

Summer, 2004

During a seminar workshop at the Mt. Madonna retreat center in California, each of us is given a block of clay and asked to form it after spending some time in meditation. To my surprise, the image that appears is a womb, decorated with the moon and stars. An ancient head is being born from this womb. I sense that it may be me.

This concept of rebirth has been a consuming image during my personal experience of transformation. My dreams have included a baby who mysteriously disappears from her spot underground, leaving nothing behind but her clothing. I cannot find her. Later the baby appears again in my dreams, and this time she is an extraordinary child—able to talk at a very young age. I feel the need to hide this unusual characteristic of my child. A few nights later, the amazing dream baby can walk.

Φ

Spring, 2005

My sleep is often broken. Sometimes I awaken with a sense of something not right or simply feeling wide awake. My body experiences an intense need to stretch or to assume unlikely positions—hands pinned over and beside my head, need to stretch my feet outward, lengthen the back, head wagging back and forth. Sometimes it is just immense tension that requires a yoga stretch to relieve it. My body has a mind of its own.

Φ

When we follow the path, it seems that the world opens to us. Today I received an email offering an office space in an alternative health practice for a very small fee. It is in a wonderful location! The whole experience seems most unlikely. Doors are opening and calling me into a new life.

Φ

Real-ization: The act of becoming real and a knowing of the same.

Φ

May 7, 2005

It is the day before Mother's Day, only 5 days until I leave home to begin interviewing. I urgently wish to be a worthy container for the stories I am about to hear. Without making a conscious connection, I have gotten a tattoo between my shoulder blades that represents my spirit name, Soaring Hawk. The black hawk's silhouette is still red and painful, but it already feels strong and ready to fly.

Tonight I received an unexpected phone call from a woman in Idaho who saw my research ad for participants in the ATC Journal. She wants to hear my voice and talk about my research. She says she loves my "Chrysalis" business name. When I ask how she had decided to walk the trail, she tells me without hesitation that God told her to do it. She says she had been out walking one day and was picking up rocks, something she often did. Some mica caught her eye as it sparkled in a piece of granite. She took this as a sign she was to walk the A.T. Her husband walked with her for 2 weeks in Georgia until her body got in shape and then joined her again at Katadhin.

She thinks of returning to walk a long trail, this time the Pacific Crest, the P.C.T. She says she is not eager to take up the pack again and has been working through her issues in Jungian analysis. She is learning to be independent, has gotten a job, and mentioned getting a house of her own. She says her gratitude to the earth is overwhelming. She walks every day and tells me there is a need to honor mother earth.

The earth loves it when we do. She describes her A.T. thru-hike as one of being reborn from the great womb of nature.

When the phone call ends, I have a sense of being very small and insignificant compared to the forces at work around me. Can I be a conduit for something beyond myself that is about to unfold?

Φ

The image of an aging Elizabeth from the New Testament arises as a powerful symbol for me during meditation. I remember the story of Sarah and Abraham from the Old Testament. Both Elizabeth and Sarah were chronologically too old to bare children, yet each of them conceived. I too am old to bear fruit, yet feel filled with new life. The source of life is beyond me.

Φ

May 11, 2005

The project seems so big and imposing. One of the women I will be interviewing has sent me a chapter from her recently completed novel. We are both surprised that she included a character named "Merry." What kind of coincidence is that? Perhaps our connections already exist. I have a sense of women's voices gathering to speak the unspoken.

Φ

May 16, 2005 near Roanoke, Virginia

The trip to meet Midnight takes me into the hills and back roads of Virginia. I walk with her across the property of the camp where she will be conducting a wilderness

weekend in a few hours. She points to a zip line that will be used by the women to fly over the pond we pass on our walk. Pink azaleas are in bloom around the picnic table where we sit. My eyes are drawn to a very small dog that arrived with some campers. It hops onto a picnic table and curls up with the backpacks while we talk.

Midnight is physically fit with a strong handshake, and she exudes self-confidence. She tells me she is grateful to be alive on the earth, and any fears she once had seem to have disappeared. I wonder about the forces that helped her to reclaim her life as she struggled with anorexia and allowed herself to celebrate life by walking the trail. She says she thinks hearing other women's stories will help her to tell more of her own.

Φ

May 16-17, 2005 in Damascus, Virginia

Finding Heidi has been difficult in the midst of the Trail Days celebration. There have been so many problems that the interview sometimes feels like it is not meant to be. I am late arriving for our meeting and worry that I will never find her. Now I stand in a small auditorium and watch a thru-hiker's video-documentary of his hike. Many of the places are familiar to me, and I find myself with tears in my eyes. Once outside, Heidi finds me, and we spend some time talking with other hikers at the tent city. It is chilly, getting dark, and threatening rain. She seems focused on the festivities and less focused on the task at hand. Someone at a table in the tent area offers her vegetarian chili in a used bowl, and Heidi gives it to me. Our interview is postponed until morning.

The night's thunderstorm brings a clear and sunny day. We find an interview location close to the trail where a stream passes a rustic cabin. I am enchanted by the

dogwood blossoms, the state's official flower, appearing over Heidi's shoulder. I hear the gentle sound of the river and the calling of birds. Listening to the story is like stepping into a stream of consciousness that ebbs and flows and often takes unexpected directions. I am surprised to hear Heidi echo my experience that we are only really alive in nature. It is these experiences that we can recall vividly while others are very forgettable.

Φ

May 17, 2005

It has been an emotionally and physically draining 3 days. Driving along the Virginia interstate toward my next meeting, I have an image of these crisscrossing paths as a spider's web connecting the women's stories. It gives me a renewed sense of purpose.

Φ

Shenandoah National Park, Virginia

The yellow rental car strains upward to the top of the Shenandoah ridge. Clouds have completely obscured any view of the valley, and I can see only what is close at hand. At first I'm disappointed there is no vista, but I remind myself I've seen it all before. Today I will be content to focus on the little things I can see close by including the beautiful trilliums that I almost missed this spring. They remind me of my mother who loved them. The apple trees are just beginning to bloom. Before I reach our meeting place, the clouds part and the view opens up to the valley. Sirocco arrives in the parking area at the appointed time, tall and fit and looking totally in control. I like that she has a tree trunk in the bed of her pickup truck.

Sirocco talks a great deal about her relationships with her best friend and with her father. The nature of these relationships seems to be recapitulated by the characters of her novel. I sense that she is still trying to work them out. We hike along the A.T. and talk casually for an hour before the recorded interview begins. She occasionally picks up trash along the trail and points out plants including a parasitic flower I've never seen before. She feels it's important to know the names for things.

Sirocco appears physically strong and very much in control, but also rather sad. We talk a lot about her relationship with her father. She's had a conversation with him about his dismissive treatment of her just the previous week. It was taking a big chance because she fears it could potentially end their relationship forever. Her newly discovered courage seems to emerge from her experiences on the trail.

Φ

I feel the pull of the vortex taking me somewhere I am largely unprepared to go. My personal identity feels shaky, and a new one is yet to emerge. There is acceleration toward a destination that is uncertain. I fear I may self-destruct from the intensity of the process.

Φ

I dream that I am by the seashore where there are enormous waves. A small section of beach is protected and sandwiched between the wall of a building and the sea. A physically handicapped little girl has been carefully placed on the sand next to me. When I turn to look at the ocean, she disappears into the water, and I am horrified. I can almost see her under the water's surface where, despite my fear, I dive under to save her. I am quite surprised to receive the assistance of a purple, eight-legged octopus. The child

is still and unmoving as I bring her to shore. I do not know how to perform CPR, but I do so anyway. Water flows out from her nose and mouth, and I know she will breathe again.

Φ

A long lost memory from childhood surfaces about the way unwanted kittens and puppies were tied in sacks and drowned in the river. Perhaps this explains my unexplained discomfort when on water.

Φ

May 29, 2005 in a county park in Ann Arbor, Michigan

CicelyB is tall, fit, and self possessed. She walks up to the car and introduces herself. We hug hello. Our walk begins on a nature trail close to a small lake. It then proceeds without a plan or any thought on her part about time. CicelyB says we will probably get lost, and we do. I am perplexed at her lack of concern since I am on a tight schedule. Throughout our walk the air is filled with an almost overwhelmingly sweet smell of honeysuckle. There are trilliums as well. After some time we meet people on horseback who tell us how to take the unpaved road back to where we began. She points out a plant called sweet cicely growing along the road. She has planted some at her home where it became a nuisance. She has found it hard to cater to her husband's needs since returning home. After our interview she will head up north to fish, yet she is somewhat annoyed at having to bring him his business papers.

We sit on benches facing each other under the trees. The tape recorder rests on the bench. Occasionally a car pulls into the adjacent parking area, someone gets out, and the car leaves again. CicelyB tells me she is partially deaf. It influences her response to otherwise annoying sounds as well as making it more comfortable when she doesn't want

to deal with people. While most of the interview is factual, there are a few moments when she chokes back tears, and I feel a significant shift in her experience. CicelyB told me in our early communication that she is unsure about having been transformed by her A.T. experience. The tone of our conversation causes me to wonder if that is the case. Yet when she talks about her summit of Katadhin, something powerful takes place. It is as if a different person appears before me briefly.

Φ

May 30, 2005 in Central, Illinois

It's a long drive across the flat fields of the Midwest to the small city where Sisu lives. It seems strange to walk into the foyer of an office building and ring the bell for her apartment as my husband drives away. I am "buzzed in" to the dividing doors and on the third floor a tall, longhaired man (her husband) stands outside the door to welcome me. Sisu is much younger than any of the other women. Her apartment is very small and nearly bare. The couple invites me to lunch before we leave on the hike. Sisu's husband has prepared delicious, vegetarian soup and is in the process of replanting seedlings on the veranda. We drive for 20 minutes to one of the few public recreation areas in this part of the state and begin our walk around a pond where Canada geese are swimming with their new goslings. Sisu tells me they just learned they are expecting their first child, and both are thrilled. The couple has been married for 10 years.

We sit on a log in the woods, she seated somewhat higher than me with the tape player between us. Her story brings me to tears on several occasions and feels very honest and personal. She tells me her trail name, Sisu, means courage, something she knew she would need. It is also meant to honor her Finnish family heritage. After a while,

I feel like I can see through her skin--her body immaterial and mine beginning to feel the same way. We occupy a timeless, space-less plane. Small raindrops occasionally fall on us through the trees. In the background there is bird song and the occasional distant sounds of voices in the park.

Φ

I feel my mind go blank as I sit in tired silence on the drive home. Then one of the stories washes over me like a wave and something surprising falls onto the sands of my awareness. Then the wave washes out again. After I return home, I continue to feel as if I am in an altered state of awareness—somewhat distant from myself.

Φ

I am surprised at how infrequent have been the references to nature in the women's stories and how common their references to people. Important threads in the stories so far have been the sense of freedom from expected social roles and the women's descriptions of ongoing transition toward a more authentic self. Other common themes have been a growing acceptance of what is, a lack of interest in possessions, a sense of gratitude toward the earth and their bodies, a continuing desire to be outside whenever possible, and a commitment to simply "be."

Φ

June 4, 2005 in Letchwork State Park, Mt. Morris, New York

I have hiked very close to this section of the Finger Lakes Trail many times and am surprised that the entrance is not as I remembered it. A new section must have opened since I was last here. It's a reminder that others keep doing the work. The trails are a work in progress that I accept without thinking. As we walk along the gorge the

river has formed, there is a feeling of familiarity and comfort arising from memories of this place. Jamie is a quiet, reserved woman though there is also an aura of self-confidence and strength similar to the other participants I've met. We sit beside the trail and occasionally gaze into the gorge. The water level is as low as we've ever seen it. It's been very dry this summer. As I look at Jamie's gentle, open face, it mingles with the faces of each of the women with whom I have already talked. This face becomes one face with which I am very familiar.

Φ

I suddenly realize that nearly all my interviews have taken place next to or near water, and I am reminded of my dream.

Φ

June 12, 2005 in Toronto, Canada

The day before my Canadian interview, I take the passenger ferry to an island off Toronto's shore. I watch the sailboats, the children playing in the pools, and I soak my feet and legs in the fountains. The water has been a welcome reprieve from the heat. Sitting by the hotel pool later that afternoon, I idly read a book review in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. The following passage captures my attention:

Walking alone, we experience ourselves as a flow of associations on a ground of mood—neither thought nor speech nor fantasy nor memory, but a mingled stream of all these, and for the most part dissipative. But not entirely. Reverie is also productive of intuitions which, with work, we can structure until we possess them lastingly outside ourselves. ("Just a closer walk with me," 2005)

I'm not sure what all of this means, but it stays with me as I prepare for the next interview.

Φ

Though I meet Cadence in a busy hotel lobby, there is no doubt when she enters the room that she is the thru-hiker I have been waiting for. Her body is fit, and she moves with assurance. We drive in her car to a city green space where paths lead in all directions around a secluded lake filled with flowers and water lilies, surrounded by wildlife. She says that she once ran here as a child, but now lives some distance north in a seasonal vacation cabin her parent owns. The water along the path in the park creates a quiet backdrop for our conversation.

Cadence tells me her hike was an opportunity to engage in moving meditation. She explains that an inner focus on self that she experienced in the early days of the hike was transformed into an open focus outward. She became no longer the center of her experience. She says she finds that her mind less frequently gets in the way these days. Her description of distance walking is important to me. It is recorded on side two of the audiotape, but somehow that part disappears. I later discover that the batteries in the recorder are run down and some parts of the interview are lost. Cadence graciously writes up the missing content and sends it to me as an email.

Φ

June 16, 2005

I return to my yoga class after several weeks away. I am astonished that my body is more open than it has ever been. Flexibility seems to be a state of mind.

Φ

June 17, 2005

I experience a flash of illumination that creates connections for me with earth elements of water and earth. As I read through the entries in my research journal, I

recognize water running through the interviews and water running through my dreams. I even painted a dream lake 2 years ago! A second powerful insight appears in the guise of a research ad I've seen on-line. It has explained for me my endless fascination with rocks. The text of the research ad describes sacred moments as times of feeling supported. That has been my experience with rocks, yet I was never been able explain their profound and spiritual presence for me until now.

Φ

June 19, 2005

I dream that I am standing in a clearing in the forest, surrounded by all kinds of wild animals. I am making a transition from being part of a civilized group to acceptance in one that is wholly wild. The dream has the qualities of an initiation in which the animals are now my family.

Φ

Summer, 2005

July 1, 2005 in Knoxville, Tennessee

Another walk and an interview. The television screen in my hotel room is warning of dangerous thunderstorms moving over the city. How will we be able to walk in such weather? For A.T. hikers, there is little choice. Despite the threat of rain, I am whisked away in another aging car to a city green space. We walk in a light, warm rain reminiscent of a day in the tropics. Nuppi asks me if I am a Buddhist. I stumble over the answer, but then guess that I am. She seems so familiar to me though we have never met before. The conversation flows easily. Our formal interview comes to a close after 2 hours, but we still find ourselves talking 6 hours later. She gives me a rock as a memento

from the summit of Mt. Katahdin, “the beginning and the end of the trail.” Nuppi surprises me by asking probing and insightful questions about my life. Outside the window of the hotel room, fireworks explode in celebration of Independence Day. I tumble into bed exhausted.

Φ

July 2, 2005 in Max Patch, Tennessee

Yesterday it rained lightly while Nuppi and I walked through the city’s green space along a stream. In my peripheral vision a heron unexpectedly took flight low from the water’s surface. I discovered that part of Nuppi’s “job” was the design and construction of water features for people’s garden. Water forms a connection.

Today is my birthday, and I am on the top of a bald mountain in Tennessee! Groovy and I have found a mowed, circular space in the grass with a 360 degree view of the surrounding mountains. I smile as I read the opening invocation: “I am clearing a space, here where the trees stand back...” This is the first birthday in my 58 years that I will celebrate alone. To my great surprise it feels fine. I wonder where water will appear today.

Φ

On the mountain there is no water though in the distance the clouds promise rain later in the day. The weather is fine now. I remain unaware that Groovy’s story is about to sear my soul. Her feisty, carefree bounce down the trail announces that she is a thru-hiker. But her tentative hug is somehow different from the rest. There is also a hesitation before she begins her story. The surrounding tall grasses hide us from view, yet we sit under a wide-open sky.

Her A.T. story begins as a retrospective about four young women celebrating summer vacation between their junior and senior years of high school. On a 2-week backpacking trip on the A.T, they experience a few days of joyous freedom before becoming the victims of unspeakable violence. Though Groovy and I are both wearing sunglasses as she tells me this story, I can see her eyes fill with tears that are mirrored by my own. She goes on to explain how she re-walked the trail 20 years later after a long exile and how it has allowed her to heal. We are sitting together in a field of grass while butterflies settle around us. I had noticed the same kind of butterflies landing on animal turds as I walked up the path to the summit. Nature is not shy about juxtaposing two apparently opposite things.

Our interview lasts about 2 hours. Then we circle the mountaintop and pass a large field of yellow wildflowers. Groovy says this place feels special to her. It is not far from where she and her friends were attacked 20 years ago, but that does not matter. She stops to talk to a male thru-hiker. I marvel at her gentleness as she inquires about his hike and offers him food from her pack.

Φ

July 2, 2005 in North Carolina

The magnitude of violence that was inflicted on Groovy and her friends overwhelms me with feelings of fear. As I drive down the winding mountain road toward my hotel, I can barely contain my tears. I swim in the pool and splash water over my body in an effort to wash away the violence that has touched me too this afternoon. Groovy has regained a sense of trust and strength and has found her voice after walking the trail a second time. Her healing is nearly complete. Is mine only beginning?

Φ

July 3, 2005 in Erwin, Tennessee

The following day I meet Buzz in a parking lot close to Johnny's Hostel. She sits with feet up on the dash in her A.T. cap that covers very short, graying hair. I worry about how long she has been waiting in this aging station wagon with the windows rolled down in the heat of a Southern summer afternoon. We begin searching for the trail, first passing a crowd of river rafters, and then crossing over a railroad track. Finally we follow the A.T. as it parallels the river and locate a quiet spot where mountain laurel is still in bloom not far from a stand of hemlocks. For 2 hours we enter a timeless space, a circle of protection that is drawn by our words and the surrounding forest. My heart is so full. As we retrace our steps, it feels as if I will split apart. Today for the first time, I realize how important it is to close the circle we open.

For the second time in as many days, I pass wild azaleas that are the most outrageous, tiger lily orange. I am seeing this wild version for the very first time in Tennessee.

Φ

July 6, 2005: a new moon, a time for beginnings

On the bones of the Great Mountain

Flowing water cleans the ancient Buddha's mind.

Do you understand the true meaning of this?

You must ask the pine tree.

-Zen master Man Gong, from The Whole World is a Single Flower

Φ

July 8, 2005

Is the A.T. really wilderness? A couple of the women didn't think it fit their definition. There are a growing number of people using it, and there is encroaching nearby development. Yet the trail and the women themselves have qualities of wildness. Gary Snyder reminded us that the root word of wilderness is wild. In nature the wild is pristine, a place where plant life can flourish in accordance with its innate qualities. Animals there are free agents living within natural systems.

The qualities associated with wildness in individuals are a lack of intimidation, self reliance, and independence. These individuals exhibit artless, free, and spontaneous behavior. The A.T. conference continues to keep the area on and near the trail as close to wild as possible. Certainly the women have exhibited these qualities.

Φ

July 9, 2005 in McConnell's Mill, Pennsylvania

I am happy to be traveling with my grown daughter and granddaughter to a lovely park. GottaHike! meets me at the appointed time in the parking lot, flashing a ready smile. She exudes self confidence in the way she carries her body. Each of these women has learned to depend on that body to carry her anywhere she wants to go. GottaHike! told me in our telephone conversation that she qualified for and ran the Boston Marathon this spring at the age of 64. Though she tells me she had a hard fall last weekend, she is ready to go again.

We walk along the river, the predominant feature in this park. The trail passes the falls, a covered bridge, and an old gristmill. After 30 minutes we retrace our steps to a large rock under the trees. Swallows sweep across the water that is flowing by us. They

deftly pick bugs from the surface without any hesitation in flight. Bird songs fill the space around us. The rock we sit on defines the orientation of our bodies and the direction of our eyes as we talk. We gaze across the stream and into the trees rather than at each other. An invisible circle of energy seems to surround the rock and us. My attention is increasingly drawn to the river moving inexorably by as our words flow. Time is moving like this river while we are here. There is nothing substantial but change. There is nothing to hold on to.

Φ

July 10, 2005 at home

I expect that today will be the last research interview, a “retake” via telephone after a failed taping session last week. We have agreed that she will find a beautiful spot to sit as we talk on the telephone. Even at a distance, Groovy and I share her description of a large red maple tree over her head and her view of the distant hills. She tells me joyfully that her first published writing has just appeared in the new Appalachian Trail Journeys magazine. She is finding her voice in a very public way and has written about what happened so long ago. Perhaps finding a voice is an experience that each of us shares. There are several published authors in the group. I now have a sense that a circle has closed with the completion of this last story. Groovy and I agree to give thanks to the tree above her head before we say good-bye.

Φ

July 16, 2005

I feel the tremendous weight of all the interviews now. Bernadette lets me know that she is still interested in telling her story even if by phone. I had hoped to be finished,

and there is less initial enthusiasm for the 12th interview. The face-to-face experience outside has been important for me in getting a sense of each person and for finding my own center. A telephone conversation seems a pale substitute, but I can't travel anymore. Yet once we start talking, a connection is made just as it was with the others.

Φ

August 27, 2005 at Springwater Meditation and Retreat Center, Springwater, New York

I am seated in the meditation room with about two dozen people. All the dissertation work has been dismissed from my conscious mind as I practice mindfulness. It is only when I return to my car that I see it. Someone across the room is wearing an Appalachian Trail t-shirt. I smile at the coincidence. Pulling out of the parking area, I happily reflect on the upcoming gathering planned for Harpers Ferry. I pause at the stop sign where the side road merges into a larger one. Across the way is a street sign. It reads Harpers Ferry.

Φ

September 25, 2005 at the Bear's Den Cottage, Harpers Ferry, Virginia

The group of women thru-hikers quickly bonds. We gather around a table laden with food that each has brought to celebrate our lives. For several hours, the women share their stories of transformation. I invite them to symbolize their experience through creative expression or by selecting from approximately 50 Celtic images displayed about the cottage. They also write about the effect the research process has had on their transformation. As they share their stories, each describes something she has created since her A.T. experience.

Φ

The storytelling process continues into the morning. As I listen to the voices, I also hear the backdrop of rain falling on trees outside and gently tapping on the roof above our heads. Time and place feels encapsulated in an other worldly bubble, and I am gazing in on myself. What is taking place here seems deeply sacred. A sense of empowerment is building in the room as the women experience this deep sense of connection.

Φ

When the stories are finally done, we clean the cottage and pack up the food for other hungry hikers. There are group snapshots taken and hugs in the parking lot. Several women have many hours of driving ahead before they arrive home again. I wander up the hill to the trail head and look fondly down the A.T. as it disappears around a bend. Driving home a few hours later, I feel strangely disconnected from my life beyond the cottage. I feel the pull of the forest.

Commentary

Stories of the A.T. wilderness journey brought us together. Writing my research journal became an important part of my transformational experience. Over a period of three years, my dreams were a portal to understanding my transforming inner self.

In the earliest dream, I struggled to retrieve a woman's body, floating in a virginal, blue shroud under the surface of dark water. The dead woman was pulled to shore and delivered to the hands a faceless man. Later a virgin appeared again in my dreams. She was deep in the catacombs of an underground cathedral. Caves and underground spaces are often felt to be archetypal feminine representations. The virgin's perfect body was raised mysteriously to Heaven while a Priest chanted prayers that I

could not hear. About this time in my waking life I began reconnecting to my intuitive sense of knowing. A deep sense of inner authority was still missing.

In my final dream, three women clearly recognized and greeted me as I went about the business of my ordinary life. Each was a significant person in my community. I experienced a sense of belonging and inner peace as a result of their recognition.

Arriving home is as apt a metaphor for my story, as I believe it can be for the stories of the women in this study. To find the home we are seeking, it is necessary to walk a disappearing and challenging path without regard to outcome. Along the way the unknowable was unveiled through the stories of twelve strangers whose lives touched me deeply. This surrender to a deep encounter with life felt like an experience of psychospiritual rebirth. I sensed that I had finally grown up and found my authentic voice.

Deeply encountering the inner and outer wilderness has been a reminder of who we really are. The mystery that resides in rocks and trees, in thunder and lightening, in wonder and tears, that mystery that pervades everything, moves through us. As water seemed to flow ceaselessly as spirit through these stories and my dreams, this group of women found connection to each other and to the world.

Chapter 6. Discussion

Chapter 6 is a discussion of what was learned in the course of this study. The research was designed to explore experiences of women. Leaving home to confront real or imagined dangers in the wilderness has been a less common narrative for women than for men. Since the beginning of the A.T.'s history, women have been in the minority of thru-hikers. Perhaps this is changing. Bernadette felt encouraged by the self-assurance she thought she saw in young women hiking the trail.

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a review of the research methods: Organic Inquiry and Intuitive Inquiry. Then the results of the study are discussed within the context of these two methods. In the Organic Inquiry section, the power of storytelling to engage the participants and me as the primary researcher in the ongoing experience of transformation is discussed. In the Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 4 section, the lenses are transformed and refined based on data collected in Cycle 3. In the Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 5 section, the Cycle 4 lenses are integrated with the literature review. Suggestions for further research and an exploration of the study's implications follow. The locus of this study was the Appalachian Trail. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the significance of place.

Review of the Methods

As previously mentioned, my goal for this research was to explore two kinds of questions. My primary question, understanding the experience of wilderness transformation, was best addressed using the Organic Inquiry method (Clements, 2003). Braud (1998) described it as an idiographic approach appropriate for exploring the nature of an experience. Subordinate questions were situated within the realm

of conceptualization, for which Braud (1998) recommended a hermeneutic approach. Thus I selected the Intuitive Inquiry method described by Anderson (2003) to help address those questions. Cycles 4 and 5 of this method are addressed in this chapter.

Organic Inquiry: Storytelling as Transformation

Organic studies can be empowering and emancipating. A measure of an Organic study's success is its capacity to become a transforming agent in the experience of researcher, participants, and readers. There is something expansive and empowering in telling one's story. This was evident from the women's reactions to the research experience. Being encouraged to tell one's story and to be heard was described as a gift. While the thru-hike was one of their most meaningful experiences, they seldom felt permission to discuss it in depth. Jamie opened her interview as follows:

First I have to say thank you for this opportunity because this is like a gift, to be able to talk about a powerful experience and have it be okay. You can be in a group of people, and they ask you a question, and you answer. I've learned to know when to stop talking about it. There is no way they can experience it like I experienced it, and you don't want to bore them to death.

After participating in the research, Jamie reflected on the experience of sharing her story.

It helped me to examine the role of the trail in my life. My A.T. thru-hike was an experience that touches me every day even after 13 years. The research helped me pause and examine the impact the trail had on my life.

The pace of modern life often denies us the opportunity to find meaning in past experience. Being invited to tell one's story allows the experience to continue unfolding.

It has allowed me to go back to my hike and look at the person I was then and the person I am now 9 years later. This was something I never looked at until I talked about it during my interview. I didn't realize that I am continually changing as a person. In my busy life I don't take enough time to look back and reflect or recognize the transformation. (Bernadette)

Listening to a story can also be transformative. I experienced this with every interview. As a story is told, the critical sense is suspended for a time and inner truths that might otherwise be missed have an opportunity to appear.

Among Jungians this is called “participation mystique” . . . Among storytellers, it is called “sympathetic magic”--meaning the ability of the mind to step away from its ego for a time and merge with another reality, experiencing it and learning ideas it can learn in no other form of consciousness and bringing these back to consensual reality. (Pinkola Estes, 1992, pp. 387-388)

The ways the research changed me are reflected in my research journal. I felt reunited with a lost part of myself, a silent sister who had found her power and her voice. As I listened to the women’s stories, I often felt as if I had entered a timeless space in which our souls were joined and I became much larger than my solitary self.

Hearing the group’s story allowed the women to experience the full impact of their collective transformation. Storytelling engages the heart, mind, and spirit, allowing an experience to be understood in a deep way (Clements, 1998). This is especially true of mythic or archetypal stories. A story provides a link to another’s experience, as well as a connection to something larger than the self. The mythic story of descent and rebirth that resonated with my story of transformation also gave new meaning to their experiences.

Wilderness became a trustworthy and awe-filled presence where they could be open to be-ing. As they walked they were engaged in a process of conscious engagement with what was present. They released old assumptions and opened themselves to truth. Suffering was transcended as it was courageously faced. United with a lost embodied self, the return home was marked by a new sense of strength, power, and authenticity.

The transformative quality of the stories was reflected in the remarks made by the resonance panel and the audio transcriber. One woman on the resonance panel and the audio transcriber were moved to re-evaluate their lives as a result of participation in the research. The audio transcriber even considered major life changes, including spending more time in nature and reconnecting with her spiritual roots. Two women on the resonance panel wrote about being moved to tears, an indication of the stories' power. A resonance panel member voiced commonality with some of the participants' experiences.

As a result of engaging in this research, I went through my own experience of transformation. The women's courage in sharing their stories, the ever-present guidance of Spirit, and the dependability and beauty of wilderness were remarkable gifts. I experienced the importance of being with just one thing at a time and being entirely present. As a result, there was a connection to something much larger than myself.

As a result of my experiences in wilderness, I gradually learned to turn down the volume on my thinking mind in order to engage the stories more fully with mind, heart, and soul. My body became a source of deep knowing. Walking in nature was a way to shift my state of consciousness before interviews or processing data. I became more open to possibilities, and synchronicities beckoned me onward. Creative expression and auditory engagement with the interview tapes prevented me from slipping back into intellectualizing encounters with the data. I learned to trust my dream images as a reliable barometer for my own transformation and to trust my experience.

Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 4: Transforming and Refining the Lenses

In this section, the initial assumptions are transformed and refined based on the original data collected in Cycle 3 and a new set of lenses emerges. A hermeneutic process

is characterized by a reiterative, back and forth motion between what is known and what is emerging. This study included such a process, following the steps of Intuitive Inquiry. A set of lenses or assumptions about the wilderness transformation experience was created early in this study in response to my immersion in thru-hiker memoirs. These lenses first appeared in the Results chapter under the heading of Cycle 2 along with the original data collected in Cycle 3, which are also called *emerging findings*. The next step in the Intuitive Inquiry approach consists of integrating the Cycle 2 lenses with the original data collected in Cycle 3. In addition, the power of the Cycle 2 lenses is assessed and exceptions are noted. Finally, the new emerging lenses are presented.

Integrating Cycle 2 Lenses with Data Collected in Cycle 3

Becoming an embodied self. Hiking in wilderness is a physical experience associated with a heightened level of physical awareness. CicelyB spoke of “huffing and puffing” up the hills as her breathe deepened. Heidi found hiking to be a terrific challenge after 50. The women’s bodies gradually accommodated the demands of the trail. They expressed a sense of pride in their strong bodies along with increased competence and positive self-esteem.

Wilderness and their moving bodies helped them feel really alive. Senses were stimulated regularly with hunger and its satisfaction, cold and later comfort. Challenge was often moderated by sensory pleasures. CicelyB described her excitement at the appearance of wild mushrooms along the trail. Heidi fantasized about a hamburger that arrived in the guise of “trail magic”. It was often cold and wet as they hiked. A dry, warm sleeping bag was an experience worth writing about.

The women experienced a heightened sense of awareness of their bodies that brought a renewed sense of wholeness. Early trauma often produces a kind of disconnection. Washburn (2003) described the effects of a withdrawal from the body.

The withdrawal...is a shift of primary locus from bodily to psychic space; it is also a defensive pulling back from a vulnerable body to psychic space experienced as a refuge. (p. 154)

Groovy, Heidi, Cadence, and Nuppi shared stories of physical and/or emotional violations. Midnight and Nuppi had struggled with eating disorders. Their embodied experience became a reliable guide, telling them when to rest, eat, and attend to physical pain. They described a heightened, gut level knowing. Late in the thru-hike, Sisu described how she found a good place to sleep. They became increasingly attuned to the presence of danger and confident in quickly assessing situations.

Finding greater authenticity and truth. The women's lives became increasingly congruent with their innermost values and personal truths. Survival left no room for pretense. Their authenticity was especially evident when they returned home. Jamie and Sirocco embarked on new careers. Midnight no longer sat politely through conversations that did not interest her. Buzz felt no need to impress others with her academic degrees or job titles. The women became generally more content with themselves.

They experienced an appreciation for and contentment with their bodies. Groovy rejoiced that her body could take her wherever she wanted to go. Heidi began to value her small breasts and thin hair. They became assets when she was hiking. GottaHike! and Sirocco accepted themselves as strong and athletic. Cadence experienced a renewed sense of health even though she was sometimes ill. Her worries about her cancer history diminished.

Their sense of spiritual connection became more personalized and authentic. Sisu's childhood religious beliefs became less dogmatic. Nuppi's allegiance to a conservative church no longer fit her post-trail freedom. She developed an interest in Eastern thought. Heidi struggled with attending church after her hike. This was an issue for her as "a church going person." Midnight's religious faith was central to healing from her eating disorder. That faith became even stronger. Cadence became more open to the idea of a spiritual quest. Sirocco struggled with the meaning of God. The women's experiences of Spirit seemed to become more personalized.

Revisiting emotional and spiritual wounds. Old wounds were remembered and healed. Their solitary walking seemed to be conducive to an open state of attention. Unexpected insights appeared, and they experienced closure around longstanding emotional and spiritual pain.

The women shared stories of pain confronted on the trail. Groovy's marriage and friendships lacked intimacy and had left her feeling lonely. GottaHike! still struggled with recollections of her daughter's rape. Buzz reviewed life with her mentally ill mother and her anger at a controlling partner. Nuppi, Heidi, and Cadence recalled their abusive childhoods.

Transforming an encapsulated self into one that is emerging and free. The trail became a transitional space, a kind of rite of passage that gave them permission for an expanded sense of self. Sirocco imagined the A.T. as a demarcation line, pointing her toward the second half of life. Feelings of competence born of challenge empowered the women to make new choices. Ossified ways of thinking dissolved, as did relationships that no longer served them. Bernadette said she never felt so free.

They exhibited a strong sense of inner authority, and their life choices became increasingly congruent with their values. Freed from a need for external validation, Buzz began considering a career path that met her needs. Cadence abandoned the architectural restoration of the family home and relocated to a place where she could live in harmony with nature. Midnight changed so much on the trail that her friends laughingly commented that aliens must have abducted her.

This expansion of self continued after the hike as they embarked on new ventures. The opportunity to reflect and discuss their experience elicited a new round of change. Nuppi left the security of her classroom-teaching job and began defining a new life direction. Midnight launched a business. CicelyB cut back at work and pursued adventures with her sister. She retained her simple lifestyle, disburdening herself of many possessions. Bernadette began engaging in creative pursuits.

Only Bernadette and CicelyB returned to lives that were externally the same. The others described substantial changes in work, relationship, lifestyle, and/or residence.

Experiencing a rebirth. Many of the stories reveal a retrieval of a lost part of the self. Wholeness was a strong theme in the stories. The most dramatic shifts seemed to take place in those with unhealed emotional wounds. This seems to confirm the findings of Hendee and Pistick (1995) who noted that those who had experienced deep emotional wounds also seemed to experience the greatest change. GottaHike! released painful aspects of the past and showed a renewed zest for life. She ran the Boston Marathon at age 64 after she returned home. Jamie was able to publicly acknowledge her sexual preference. With that acknowledgment came more satisfying choices at work and in relationships. Nuppi began taking pride in her body and felt release from her food

addictions. Both she and Heidi spoke about a rebirth of trust. Sirocco gave up her careful deference to her father and felt free to challenge him in his own career field.

The women expressed a deep sense of connection with the world and with nature in particular. Sirocco said it was as if she could feel the earth breathing. Groovy spoke of seeing the world clearly for the first time. Peak experiences and timeless moments of awe and wonder are portrayed in the women's writing.

Opening to feelings of love and gratitude. The women in this study expressed gratitude for their experiences. Concerns for the earth were repeated often. This sense of gratitude was evident in their strong environmental ethic. The women spent and consumed little and expressed pain over the culture's wastefulness. Sisu described her sense of deep connection with the earth, which was engendered after spending many nights sleeping outside. Groovy voiced profound gratitude and respect for both the earth and her own body.

A commitment to service is a hallmark of transformative change (Clements, 2003), and it is present in their stories. The women shared their experiences with others. GottaHike! wrote a book, hoping to encourage other mid-life women to follow their dreams. Midnight started an outdoor adventure business for women and engaged in motivational speaking. Sirocco targeted her grant writing toward environmental groups. Nuppi raised a large sum of money for cancer research in memory of a fellow teacher. Jamie donated time leading others on hiking and canoeing trips. She told of feeling especially positive when helping other women feel empowered. Sisu committed to working with pre-school children and spoke about her heightened sensitivity to others' pain.

Assessing the Power of Cycle 2 Lenses

In order to clearly identify the degree of change in the researcher's perspective between the lenses of Cycle 2 and 4, Esbjorn (2003) developed three categories of presenting her Cycle 4 lenses: new, change, and seed lenses. New lenses signify breakthroughs in understanding that were entirely new and unexpected, change lenses signify a significant progression from lenses presented in Cycle 2, and seed lenses signify lenses that were embedded in Cycle 2 but became nuanced and developed in the course of the inquiry. (Esbjorn-Hargens & Anderson, 2004, p. 14)

Characteristics of walking and wilderness transformation included an increased sense of authenticity; a deepened sense of competence and inner authority; a feeling of connectedness to others, the world, and within themselves; the experience of wounds healed; and a commitment to something beyond the self. Most of the initial assumptions (Cycle 2) were affirmed by the study's findings (Cycle 3) and might be described as change lenses since the findings generally elaborate earlier understandings about the wilderness transformation experience. This is not surprising, since Appalachian thru-hiker memoirs were the most important text resource for me at the onset of the study.

Exceptions

The original assumption that extended wilderness walking is associated with a sense of rebirth was modified, making this a seed lens. Feelings of rebirth were part of the experience for most of the participants. Three named significant changes in their lives, but they did not experience themselves as different people as a result of their thru-hiking experience. In contrast, Midnight said she felt reborn. The women who were exceptions had not invested as much emotional energy in the dream as the others, nor did they disclose the same kind of woundedness. Thus the seed lens is as follows: A hiker's sense of being reborn or becoming new was related to the strength of the walker's emotional investment in the experience as well as the presence of emotional wounds.

New Emerging Lenses

The findings generated new understandings or lenses including the following:

1. The outer journey paralleled an inner journey that began with increasing physical integration, followed by a sense of interpersonal ease and community, a feeling of focused presence, and finally a sense of wholeness and connection.
2. Old cognitive structures broke down at about the same time that the body's resources were exhausted. It was also the time when hikers experienced an emotional sense of healing.
3. Exposure and connection of the embodied self to nature's cycles were associated with a rebirth of trust in the world and in their own sense of knowing. Women saw themselves reflected in the physical forms of nature.
4. The transformation process was an ongoing process. It continued to unfold long after the hike ended.
5. Gender and age influenced the character of the wilderness experience, including the kinds of wounds the participants experienced and the life tasks that occupied their attention.
6. Wilderness walking seemed to facilitate a midlife transition to a new level of spiritual development that emphasized living a meaningful life, an engagement in creative work, and altruist activities.

Intuitive Inquiry Cycle 5: Integrating Findings and Literature Review

In this section, the new emerging lenses developed in Cycle 4 are combined with the empirical and theoretical literature that was reviewed. Then, the final lenses are presented.

Integrating Cycle 4 Lenses with the Literature Review

Why walk? Walking returns us to the world of experience, the real-ity of life.

Segal (n.d.) noted that repetitive, strenuous movement provides an opportunity to truly experience the body. There are many ways to encounter the wilderness, walking being one. Movement itself was described as important to several of the participants.

Hiking has the potential for uniting body and intellect. A thru-hike requires a step-by-step ordering of tasks and attention to what is constantly unfolding. In the way that it consistently returns one to the present moment, it has qualities similar to meditation. Without the usual distractions of work or family and hobbies, repressed thoughts, feelings, and memories emerged.

Re-attunement to the body has been described as a return to the feminine principle. Murdock (1990) asserted that the feminine has been largely banished from contemporary society. Belinky et al. (1986) referred to women's ways of knowing as a more expansive, embodied approach. The women's stories showed evidence of this, including references to heightened intuition and greater feelings of trust that emerged the longer they hiked.

The experience of wild-erness. Qualities of wild-erness appear in the women's embodied writing. Themes are summarized in the Results chapter. Several stories suggest identification with the feminine face of wilderness. The animals and plants along the way were adaptable, instinctive, strong, and relational. Sisu waited on the trail and seemed to understand intuitively a mother bear as she coaxed her cubs down the tree. Whenever a woman resonated with these qualities, a sense of connection to the wild world grew. Wilderness was sometimes described as timeless, and it evoked a sense of wonder and

awe. There are suggestions in some stories of a peak experience or *wilderness rapture* as described by Cumes (1998) including some sort of alteration in consciousness. The boundaries between the self and other blurred, and they experienced self and nature as one.

You can count on wild nature to reflect your soul because soul is your most wild and natural dimension. Nature gives birth to your soul....Wild nature contains all the terrestrial patterns of belonging. (Plotkin, 2003, p. 41)

As nature proved to be trustworthy, their initial fears dissipated. Yet nature was also experienced as harsh and unforgiving at times. Frailties inherent in the human condition became obvious, and everyone on the trail was treated without distinction. Their ordeals produced many opportunities to empathize with others as well as to receive compassionate care. There was an unconditional acceptance in wilderness, and a caring hiker community embraced even the loners.

Wilderness became a mirror of an expanded self. Constant exposure to the cycles of nature attuned them to the constancy of change and an acceptance of life as unfolding. The self became an emerging self. On the A.T. the women felt independent, strong, and truthful. Snyder (1990) noted the relationship of such qualities to the root of the word *wilderness*, which is the word *wild*.

Gender played a role in the wounds several of them experienced, but the feminine qualities of wilderness were experienced as healing. A deep sense of connection began to grow between the women and the earth. Indeed, Macy (1991) maintained that our healing and the earth's will take place simultaneously. In addition, identification with feminine qualities of nature appeared in their writing. This may explain the women's passionate commitment to the environment. In saving it they are also saving themselves.

Stages of wilderness transformation. The thru-hiking experience generally unfolded in 4 stages: pre-hike contemplation, planning and implementing, the hike itself (engaging the physical, engaging the interpersonal, and encountering the self), and coming home. Characteristics of each stage are discussed. The themes seem to parallel the stages of psychospiritual development according to the Ruumet (1997).

Nearly all the hikers told of a long period of pre-trail contemplation. The A.T. represented something significant to each of them and became a focus for inner longings. They waited until the time was right.

An image of white blazes became the life sustaining force in Nuppi's abusive childhood and early marriage. Jamie emphasized the power of a dream to move her forward, to help focus her energy and resources. Buzz had planned to celebrate 20 years of partnership with a joint A.T. thru-hike as the big event. Groovy carefully arranged to heal by reclaiming the place on the trail where her assault had taken place many years before. The women's dreams had typically been postponed for years, but they remained very much alive.

As a decision was consciously made to go, several hikers made elaborate plans and reassigned responsibilities. There were financial arrangements, negotiations with employers and/or loved ones for time away, and gathering/packaging/mauling trail supplies. They voiced a mixture of anticipation and fear.

This stage often included some physical conditioning and an emphasis on the body. Washburn (2003) described a reawakening body as transformation begins. Cadence marched around the neighborhood in a heavy backpack during the frigid Ontario winter. Buzz realized that lecturing college classes on the intricacies of backpacking would not

help her do it. GottaHike! enrolled in a women's physical conditioning course to prepare for what lay ahead. It did not represent for these women an escape from reality. Instead, Jamie spoke for herself and others about taking care of responsibilities before leaving for the trail.

The first challenges encountered on the trail were predominately physical. Conditioning and resolve were tested early and often, and concerns regarding competence and safety arose. Sisu was confronted by her fear of heights and water crossings. Heidi's small stature and age presented physical challenges. GottaHike! and Buzz struggled with equipment and refining their camping skills. Journeys often began while the mountains were blanketed with snow. Bernadette suffered from the cold. The women became increasingly adept at balancing their desire for comfort with the weight on their backs. Nonessentials were eliminated. The women's self-confidence and physical ease grew each time they were able to meet each new challenge. They usually walked alone. Their bodies were fine tuned to exceptional conditioning.

The second stage of the hike was marked by interpersonal challenges and managing relationships. Most eventually made a deliberate disconnection from relationships back home to focus on their own experience. Such a disconnection may have been a necessary part of their transformative process.

How often do people unconsciously place limits on their inner development or level of outer achievement in order to not violate (too much) the suitable family "ceiling" to what is possible or what the family can tolerate without consigning the deviating member into psychological exile (Ruumet, 1997, p. 12).

In the early months, Buzz's partner argued with her from a distance. Sisu fought with her husband and struggled with feelings of not belonging in the hiking community.

Heidi kept completely to herself, not wanting to invest in people who might go home. Friends and loved ones consumed a lot of GottaHike!'s energy.

The women experienced new insights about old relationships. Sirocco found, to her surprise, that her hiking partner was not (and had never really been) her best friend. Cadence was able to test the qualities of her new American hiking companions and was surprised to find they were much like her. The women revised their rules for relationships. They began honoring their own needs.

A restoration of trust in others and the world gradually emerged. Trail associations had a different quality than prior relationships. Strangers could be counted on for support, and thru-hikers regularly engaged in acts of kindness. There was a marked absence of co-dependent care-taking. Hikers were expected to carry their own weight. Trail friendships were characterized by genuine concern, and they developed quickly. Gender and age were unimportant. Partnerships provided safety and welcome companionship. Even non-hikers proved kind and trustworthy. Sirocco and her partner found shelter for the night in someone's commercial greenhouse. A virtual stranger offered Nuppi help after her mother and sister failed to do so.

An upsurge of emotion surfaced when the hikers' bodies began breaking down. Midnight observed that not all hikers were willing to traverse the confrontation with the self. This experience was described as more difficult than the physical challenges of the trail. The predominately solitary thru-hiking experience seemed to open a space. A hiker could spend 12 hours a day walking alone.

Being willing to stay with the pain was experienced as critical to Cadence's healing. She likened hiking in wilderness to the practice of meditation. Cumes (1998)

noted the consciousness-shifting quality of wilderness. Responses were often cathartic, and wilderness became an accepting container where there was no one to judge. Groovy lay on the ground and sobbed. Sirocco silently raged at her father for his lack of support. Heidi felt her anger over betrayals, but found she could trust the trail. Buzz mourned her long held sense of inadequacy and un-lovability. Physical pain was also endured. After seriously injuring her ankle, GottaHike! walked on. Whatever the emotion, the women experienced it fully.

The wilderness became their home. Jamie spoke of her growing comfort level as she walked in the darkness without fear. The women experienced wonder and inspiration in their encounters with bears and snakes, thunderstorms and rain. They seemed to grow equally at home with previously disparaged aspects of the self. Groovy reflected on her life before the trail. "It seemed to me that I was trying to fill a hole in my life or fill an emptiness that I couldn't possibly fill." As GottaHike! walked, she was able to integrate an experience that had once been rejected.

I came to be present to myself in every respect: my body, my emotions, my intellect, my feeling of being in touch, in harmony with that part of the universe, a part of other people, a part of a tree... I came to trust myself and my environment and trust my intuition and give myself permission to experience it all in the present, being present to everything that was happening.

Their transformation process continued after the hike ended and they implemented what was learned on the trail. "Transformation is life long. Sometimes we don't know how much we are affected until later and we look back" (Heidi). Fruits of transformation were previously discussed in the Literature Review chapter. They included a deep level of ecological awareness and responsibility (Riordan, 2002)

The changes in the women were often visible and concrete. Sisu, the Midwestern woman who was so uncomfortable with mountains on her A.T. hike, told how her fear became transformed. After her A.T. experience, she took a thoroughly enjoyable thru-hike on the extreme elevation of the Pacific Crest Trail. Her previous fear, anger, and resentment disappeared.

As the group reflected on the physical, mental, and emotional challenges of the trail, there was an unshakeable confidence that they could do anything. These women were some of the most self-assured and relaxed people I had ever met.

Wilderness transformation and the psychospiritual models. The stages of wilderness transformation experienced by this study's participants closely parallel Ruumet's (1997) model of psychospiritual development. By virtue of age, the women in this study were good candidates for transformation. Nearly all were 30 years old or older when they began their thru-hike. Each made a conscious decision to set aside their practical responsibilities and embark on a challenging physical and emotional journey, at times without the support of their loved ones.

Washburn (2003) asserted that transformation can begin with a life crisis or when life simply begins to feel stale. The feeling is characterized by a growing disenchantment with the ego project. The call to a more expansive self is often rejected in Western culture. The women described the presence of an impending life crisis or a vague sense of staleness as they ended the pre-hike contemplation stage.

According to Ruumet (1997), it is significant when development proceeds beyond the egoic/power center, the *Achieving Self*, to the *Loving Self*. The latter is characterized by an emphasis on empathy, kindness, and extending kinship to all humanity rather than

accomplishments. Observable hallmarks are altruistic activity, devotion, and service to others. In Anderson's (2004b) model of psychospiritual development, transformative change is signaled by a turn toward the *Heart Center*. The overriding question for a person at this stage becomes, "What makes life meaningful?"

The women in this study were almost uniformly involved in altruistic activity, a characteristic of the Loving Self (Ruomet, 1997), and/or expressed a desire to live meaningfully, a characteristic of the Heart Center (Anderson, 2004b). One woman raised funds for cancer research with her hike, another participant gave motivational talks to young women, and another participant wrote a book encouraging mid-life women to fulfill their dreams. Jamie volunteered frequently with her hiking club to take others into nature. Sisu rode her bike to work in all kinds of weather and collected others' recycling.

Earning and achieving became much less important in their post trail lives. Consumerism was uniformly rejected as a value. The women gave away many material possessions after returning home. Living out of a backpack was a lesson in what they truly needed. Lifestyles were designed for maximum flexibility, allowing time to be in nature, hike, or engage in quiet reflection. Both Nuppi and Buzz became grant writers, enjoying the independent character of their work. Sirocco, CicelyB, and Midnight chose self-employment, scheduling work around their outdoor pursuits. Groovy planned to leave her corporate job to start her own business.

They expressed interest in what was intrinsically gratifying or meaningful. Sisu remained committed to her work with pre-school children though the pay was low. GottaHike! had earlier served in the Peace Corps, but wanted to do more. Sirocco was a grant writer for environmental groups. Midnight's business was designed to help women

realize their inner strength through challenges in the outdoors. Buzz was considering becoming a Buddhist teacher. Nuppi wanted to work with women recovering from addiction. Groovy planned to start her own business. Heidi worked as little as necessary. CicelyB wanted to find ways to work less than she did. The emphasis in their lives was on simplicity. Living was done consciously, and they emphasized doing one thing at a time.

These stories portray a chronological unfolding of concerns along the trail that roughly parallels Ruumet's (1997) developmental trajectory. The first half of the journey recapitulated stages of egoic development. During the first month or two on the trail, the women focused on issues of safety and security characteristic of Ruumet's Survival Center (stage 1).

Next they struggled to balance their needs with the needs of others. This is contained in Ruumet's Kinship Center (stage 2). They continued to feel less than fully present to themselves.

The focus on belonging was gradually set aside, and each woman began hiking her own hike. The women described feelings of mastery and of controlling their own destiny characteristic of the Egoic Center (stage 3). Their choices became increasingly based on what was right for them as individuals.

A significant transformation is characteristic of Ruumet's (1997) Aloha Center (stage 4). This became evident after a couple of months on the trail. Heartfelt reciprocity and a sincere sharing that went beyond "need and greed" characterized their relationships.

Stage 5, the Individuating stage, began to manifest after they returned home. It included authentic self-expression and creative talent used to serve a path with heart (Ruumet, 1997). Creative endeavors and service are evident in their stories. Their energy flowed outward in stage 5. Three women wrote and published books about their experiences, another woman wrote an article for a hiking journal, and three new businesses were launched. Others engaged in garden design, photography, authoring a novel, and ceramic work.

Finally, a few of the women committed themselves to a mindfulness practice. This is a characteristic suggestive of the Integral Self (stage 6).

These experiences resemble a process of ongoing self-actualization similar to what Kuhn (2001) noted in a study of sailors and transformation. There is evidence in the women's stories and writings that they had peak experiences on the trail. They also evidenced an emergence of creative energy. Virtually all of the women were involved in some kind of creative endeavor after returning home. Maslow (1999) found that peak experiences and creativity are more common in self-actualizing individuals.

To summarize, changes as a result of thru-hiking the A.T. included an expansion of each woman's sense of self, her definition of and connection with Spirit, and her commitment to service (Clements, 2003), which are consistent with the study's definition of transformation. The women's outer journeys seemed to parallel inner ones. The changes were engaged willingly. Would they have taken place had the women not gone for their thru-hike? The changes took place in a short span of about half a year, and it would appear that wilderness walking was the catalyst.

There were variations in the women's experiences that may have been age and gender-related. A few of the women continued to search for an alternate life path. Bernadette returned to the same job. She welcomed the lack of emotional involvement she felt with her job when she returned home, but that gradually changed. She began to voice a vague dissatisfaction and a desire for something more. Increasingly her energy was invested in creative undertakings. Heidi felt unsure of what she wanted to do. Travel became an important part of the agenda. Cadence worked as a therapist for a health service organization, but was tentative about her future. She voiced a belief that her transformation was still very much in process and her work in the world not yet coalesced.

Age-related factors might have influenced the changes that took place in this group. Sisu, the youngest woman in the study, was unsure of her next step as she helped to put her husband through college. The couple was also anticipating the birth of their first child and the ways it would change their lives. CicelyB was concerned about providing for her retirement. Bernadette felt some guilt about not spending more time with her aging parents. The women said they would spend more time hiking or relaxing outdoors if they did not have these responsibilities.

Presenting Final Lenses

The development of the Cycle 5 final lenses represents the integration of the new emerging lenses from Cycle 4 with the literature review. There were 8 emerging themes from the women's stories that related to the fruits of their thru-hiking experience and 12 distinct qualities of wilderness that appeared in their embodied writing. When I integrated the stories and the overarching themes with original assumptions and the literature

review, a final set of lenses unfolded. They summarize what was revealed about wilderness walking and transformation in this study.

1. Spending an extended time in wilderness was conducive to the women's realization of an authentic self, which then allowed them to embrace it. Their conscious embodiment was conducive to a sense of focused presence and a beingness that facilitated an integration of disparaged aspects of the self.
2. Walking in wilderness allowed the women to experience connection to others and to the earth itself and produced a sense of inner and outer harmony.
3. Walking in wilderness and encountering nature in a close way facilitated the emergence of an authentic spirituality, of being in relationship with something greater, a part of something vast, timeless, ever changing, and filled with wonder.
4. Meeting the daily challenges of thru-hiking led to a sense of inner confidence and strength that carried over into life. This experience included finding one's authentic voice.
5. The earth's sensuous and feminine face became a reflection for the women of their own beauty, which they experienced as validating and healing.
6. Experiencing the dependability of wilderness with all of its cycles and changes generated a profound sense of trust in the world and in oneself.
7. Spending an extended time in wilderness led to a sense of appreciation and gratitude. That experience appeared to flow outward in the form of service, as a sense of deep ecology, and as an outpouring of creative energy.
8. While walking for an extended time in wilderness tended to produce significant inner change, it was not invariably transformative. It was associated with the

strength of the walker's intention and with the presence of emotional and spiritual wounds.

Creativity and Transformation

Examples of the women's creative work appear in Appendix I. Some samples of spontaneous artwork can also be viewed in the Results chapter. A creative force seemed to flow from each of the women. This urge to create began on or after the hike for almost everyone and continued at home. The exception was Sirocco who was a professional artist before her hike.

My transformative walking experience was also associated with an outpouring of creative expression. I felt inspiration coming from a place beyond me, from a place much larger than my egoic self.

Creativity has been associated with connectedness, openness, and self-actualization (White, 1998). These same qualities appeared in the women's stories and writing. As the creative force breaks through into awareness, life itself is transformed.

A major--perhaps *the* major--psychological task of our time is to rescue the creative life of the spirit from destruction by the ossified patriarchal values and lifeless materialism that characterize a large segment of the world today. ...the planet's survival may depend upon the number of people who are able to engage this task. (Dallett, 1988, p. 37)

The women shared information during their interviews about a variety of creative pursuits. Three had published personal memoirs of their A.T. thru-hike. Sirocco had begun writing a novel. Bernadette worked with ceramics. Nuppi designed and constructed water features. Buzz wrote poetry for the first time. Cadence took photographs, as did most of the women. CicelyB was a gourmet cook. Midnight and Groovy created innovative businesses.

Their desire to express what they felt and saw while on the trail almost universally took the form of photographs. They shot hundreds of pictures, trying to capture the mystery of wilderness. At the group gathering, several women chose to create transformation images that appeared with their stories.

I expected to collect trail artifacts that would shed light on the relationship between the creative impulse and time in wilderness. The rare trail journal's contents were often confined to mundane facts such as mileage and food consumption. After a long day of solitary walking, social time was highly valued. The women felt too tired to write or draw after a long day of walking. Once at home, creative energy began to be expressed in their lives.

Suggestions for Further Research

A study on the influences of wilderness walking on transformation raises many questions related to age and gender variables. How long must one walk before a confrontation with the self takes place? The participants walked for at least 2 months before they noticed deep changes. A research study of A.T. section hikers, those who go out for a week or more, might be conducted to determine the length of time one must walk to experience significant change.

Not everyone who thru-hikes the A.T. experiences transformation. There were exceptions in this research study. The study recruited individuals who self-selected as participants based on a research definition of transformation. Two of the women stated from the beginning that they were not sure they matched all the criteria. Are there personal characteristics that make transformation more likely?

Cicely and Bernadette were recruited later in the study, and they presented interesting contrasts to Jamie who felt totally transformed by her thru-hiking experience. An optimal balance between independence and connection may have influenced their experiences. Bernadette was one of the younger women in the group. She hiked with her spouse, who handled the functional responsibilities of day-to-day life and left her to manage social interactions. She didn't need to depend solely on herself, and she didn't spend most of her time alone, as did many of the others. Her story conveys a degree of comfort that others didn't experience. This may have contributed to her feeling less changed by her thru-hike.

Age-related, developmental considerations should be explored in future studies. Based on Washburn's (2003) theory of psychospiritual development, I hypothesized that mid-life would be the most fruitful time for a transformation to take place. Sisu found her experience life-changing, though she was still in her late 20s. This study suggested that individuals can experience a transformation before mid-life. What kind of experiences might facilitate this?

Being able to experience a deep and open connection to the world may also be a component in the degree of transformation experienced. CecilyB was hearing-impaired. She found that it made her wilderness situation less different from daily life than it may have been for the others. She said she was less fearful of what she could not hear. CicelyB also found her solitary state a relief rather than a trial since she often has to strain to hear conversations in social situations. Hearing may amplify the transformative qualities of wilderness.

What role does emotional wounding or unresolved interpersonal issues play in setting the stage for transformation to take place? The women in the study who felt most thoroughly transformed revealed an emotionally difficult past or described significant, unresolved issues. Further studies might specifically investigate the role of wounding in facilitating transformative experience.

One of the most compelling questions from this research study involves the relationship between wilderness walking experiences, transformation, and gender. This study should be replicated with groups of males and females, comparing their experiences. Men often respond to long distance hiking as a competitive pursuit, yet evidence from the participants' stories indicates that men the women encountered were deeply affected by their experience.

Study Implications

Implications for Women

These stories described both the inner darkness and the light. They included descriptions of the ways the women felt less than whole. They also described a process of retrieving a lost self. The stories highlight significant life changes that marked a transformation. The unfolding of inner strength, courage, instinct, playfulness, creativity, and fierce devotion were portrayed. Many of the women told a story of a descent into the darkness of self-doubt, depression, sadness, or grief before emerging into the light.

What made these experiences a psychologically and spiritually healing encounter? Their A.T. thru-hike offered a variety of conditions or qualities that seldom existed in women's lives. The first was the precious gift of uncommitted time. Their hike became an opportunity to listen for a deep, inner voice that had waited to whisper in their ears. A

second characteristic was the hike's ability to provide a physical space where each woman could unfold, trying out unique aspects of self beyond the implicit rules of femininity that are embedded in family, community, and culture. Heidi called the trail a great leveler. Male or female, rich or poor, the trail treated each one the same. The trail was an opportunity to experience self-reliance in the face of remarkable challenge. While these qualities can also be found in other settings, there are few places or times that offer them all.

Most uniquely, their walk was an opportunity to encounter the Wild Woman archetype. Estes (1992) portrayed this as synonymous with wilderness. The wild qualities of the feminine have often been disparaged in modern life. As the women encountered those qualities in wilderness, the experience must have seemed like hearing the sound of a lost sister's voice. In "the green tunnel" the women had opportunities to experience inner strength, courage, instinct, playfulness, creativity, and fierce devotion.

Both the endangered wild and the endangered woman have encountered forces bent on extinguishing their wildness. Estes (1992) described the post-World War II generation as a time when women have been infantilized or treated as property. Jamie characterized this false, female self as "putting on high heels and talking about margarine." In the civilized world of home and community, the participants received little encouragement for the strong and fierce qualities of the feminine. Wilderness demanded these qualities. The women experienced empowerment as they faced wind, lightning, hunger, and cold.

Washburn (2003) suggested that midlife offers a critical opportunity for psychospiritual development. The process of transformation began for almost all of these

women at mid-life. For years, most had attended to the needs of others at the expense of the self. The stories suggest that a woman's psychospiritual development may be different than a man's. The relational needs that are often important in a woman's life mean that finding her voice is set aside for many years.

For some, failing to conform to a socially constructed vision of femininity seemed to mean facing the disapproval of partners, parents, or employers. Groovy's story even demonstrated the potential for mortal danger if a young woman stepped outside her prescribed role. Girls were discouraged from going into the woods without the protection of a man. Despite each woman's specific fears, the day came when each chose to follow the inner voice that told her she must go.

The women offered a host of reasons for taking their long, solitary walk, though each woman returned home feeling free and complete. There appeared to be a reduction in psychological distress, an increase in creativity, a tangible and sincere commitment to the environment, and a deep desire to give service, often by contributing to the wholeness of other women. These A.T. thru-hikers are extraordinary people. I felt a tangible sense of presence when each one entered a room. The gifts they seemed to receive from wilderness included psychological healing, personal integration, creativity, and spiritual unfolding.

Implications for Transpersonal Psychology

The participants displayed many of the characteristics of Maslow's (1999) self-actualized person. This fully functioning self was also a re-embodied self. Their connection to the world in an embodied way contributed to the women's growing sense of well-being and to the unfolding of psychospiritual development in this study. I believe

that the changes in their development were remarkable, using Ruumet (1997) and Anderson's (2004a) models of psychospiritual development as markers. Such change appears truly transformative. A transition to non-egoic levels of psychospiritual development has often been associated with long term, focused spiritual practice. In addition, the women's stories appear to support Ruumet's (1997) assertion that psychospiritual development is a spiraling process, often involving returns to concerns and issues of earlier developmental levels before moving on again.

Transpersonal psychotherapists and spiritual directors would do well to embrace a holistic approach to the facilitation of human psychospiritual development. In this group of women, remarkable changes took place as they walked. The constant movement of the body and stimulation of the senses by an ever-changing wild world were associated with a heightened sense of presence and enhanced awareness of the women's intimate connection with the world beyond their skin. Their mindful, embodied practice elicited a sense of connection and an experience for well-being, underscoring the need for holistic approaches to healing both persons and the earth. These stories portrayed women who were strong, caring, confident, connected, and committed to the world at large long after their thru-hike came to an end.

They are a reminder of the human potential for a broader and deeper kind of knowing than is often assumed possible. An expanded level of understanding seemed to unfold as the women re-connected to a larger self, attuning to the body and being open to the feedback they received. They began voicing a greater level of trust, first in themselves and subsequently in others. There was a sense of emerging clarity about what was good

and true for each one, and this knowledge continued to guide their lives off the trail. Learning to trust the self and others also helped them in their search for true community.

Another important implication of this study relates to the potential- and perhaps the responsibility- of psychological research to be transformative in its conduct. The study design offered an opportunity for participants to tell a life-changing story to someone who would listen deeply and treat the story with respect. Storytelling is an integral part of the Organic Inquiry approach and includes a faithfulness on the primary researcher's part to retaining stories in the participants' own words. The uniqueness of each person's experience was honored and found to have meaning. Most powerfully for me, an individual story ultimately extended beyond the smaller self. Each storyteller was able to find herself as part of a much larger story. The act of storytelling became a valuable, growth-enhancing experience. Several women felt that their transformation was facilitated by the opportunity to share the story with others.

It is noteworthy that intuitive and altered states of consciousness were critical components in this study. Wilderness was my primary guide and partner for understanding as I walked with an open state of awareness. Dreams and synchronicities were honored. Creative expression became an important path for eliciting holistic themes, and I used my sense of hearing as an important guide for understanding. Creative expression became a way for the women to identify visual metaphors for their transformation. The incorporation of embodied writing allowed the experience to emerge for the participants, the primary researcher, and the reader. Finally, I chose to conduct this study in an environment similar to the one in which the experience originally took place. Participants could re-member, through their walk in the forest and through the

movements of the body, the experience as it unfolded. Other researchers might be encouraged to partner with the environment while conducting studies. As a result of opening myself to alternative ways of knowing, I experienced a deep sense of humility, wonder, connection, and gratitude.

Personal Implications

I had several goals for this study. The first was to open myself to an experience of psychospiritual transformation while seeking to understand the experience of my participants. A second was to share with readers some experiences and research tools acquired during the course of my transpersonal studies. Finally, I hoped to touch others' minds and hearts through a vicarious engagement with the power and wonder of wilderness.

Whether these goals have been met to a great or small degree, I am certain that I was transformed by this experience. As with all wilderness journeys, many parts of it were unexpected. The research process itself was a maturing experience for me: learning to make my own choices without assurances that they were the "right" ones, listening to my inner voice, learning to travel the country alone and talk with complete strangers in the course of collecting stories, and assuming a degree of authority and a willingness to speak about what I know. The experience has been one of learning to take risks and learning to trust my instincts, my body, and my heart.

Early in the research process, I was drawn to a poem by Mary Oliver that spoke to me for reasons I only dimly understood at the time. The poem appeared as an initial page in this manuscript. It is reprinted here because it ultimately became a statement of my transformative experience.

The Journey

One day you finally knew
 what you had to do, and began
 though the voices around you
 kept shouting
 their bad advice—
 though the whole house
 began to tremble
 and you felt the old tug
 at your ankles.
 “Mend my life!”
 each voice cried.
 But you didn’t stop.
 You knew what you had to do,
 though the wind pried
 with its stiff fingers
 at the very foundations,
 though their melancholy
 was terrible.
 It was already late
 enough, and a wild night,
 and the road full of fallen
 branches and stones.
 But little by little,
 as you left their voices behind,
 the stars began to burn
 through the sheets of clouds,
 and there was a new voice
 which you slowly
 recognized as your own,
 that kept you company
 as you strode deeper and deeper
 into the world,
 determined to do
 the only thing you could do—
 determined to save
 the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver, 1986 from *Dream Work*

My body became a sure source of knowing. I learned to honor it and to honor my
 own needs, even when they conflicted with the desires of others. In listening to the inner
 voice, I expanded my definition of what it means to know. This experience changed the

way I see the world, and it also changed my priorities. My interest in material things withered like tired blossoms in late summer.

What motivates me most today is sharing the wonder, the beauty, and the joy of this world and its wildness with others. I want to help others see. Listening and telling my truth has proved to be powerful. Finding my place and my connection to the universe has been irreplaceable.

Throughout this process of change, I was conscious of my community of support, including a circle of strong and inspiring women. Entering fully into that community of authentic persons meant setting aside a list of inner expectations I formerly held for myself. Instead I grew open to an expanded sense of who I really am and who I might be. In ways similar to the women in this study, a sense of coming home to myself meant finding and celebrating a playful, strong, relational, wild self. In the end, I believe I became a strong and confident woman.

Implications for Wilderness

In a world fraught with tensions and destructive and dehumanizing wars, I believe it is critical that we find ways to foster psychospiritual growth in the common woman and man. We are badly in need of ways to heal our emotional and spiritual wounds and to transcend parochial self-interest, a singular focus on me and mine. Many post-industrial societies appear to be places of overriding loneliness, disconnection, and spiraling addiction. There is little sense of responsibility for others or for the earth itself.

How can we facilitate new ways of seeing and feeling? This study suggests that walking in wilderness can promote significant psychospiritual development. Ruomet (1997) wrote that the journey to the heart is not an easy path for contemporary Western

culture. There are few rites of passage in society that lead us there. Psychotherapy and meditation foster individual psychospiritual development, but are accessed by relatively few. Reconnection with wilderness requires no human mediation. At least for now, it is available to almost anyone.

There is a continuing debate about how to manage wild places. As populations rapidly expand and our appetite for consumer goods continues to grow, wild spaces are continually being eroded to make way for development. Traditional neighborhoods are transformed into the developed sameness of housing subdivisions. Sirocco observed that the ubiquitous “super center” and fast food restaurant, the repetitive shopping mall, and the planned subdivision have become the norm. Where will we go to find wilderness? Standing on the Shenandoah ridge during the interview process, I looked down at commercial and housing developments extending in all directions, as far as the eye could see. The interstate highways below me were clogged with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Only this mountainous ridge remained undisturbed in all of its wondrous variety, uniqueness, and mystery.

Roberts (1998) asserted that our sense of belonging anywhere is disappearing. I experienced a profound sense of sadness in recognizing this. If the particularities of the earth become expendable and a great same-ness takes its place, our sense of connection with the world will disappear. Eventually there may be no places to call to the imagination, to engender a rebirth of soul, to heal our wounded-ness. Dallett (1988) asserted that we have lost our muse. The limitless variations and the unfolding beauty of wilderness can become reminders of the regenerative creativity that lies buried within us. The spark that ignites life rests within an embodied self.

It is my hope that this study will encourage the growth of a true ecology, the kind that springs from spending unhurried time in wild places and learning to love them. For this group of women, wilderness walking became a recollection of the body: their physical bodies, a collective body, and the body of the earth. The wilderness experience elicited a deep sense of gratitude, including an authentic desire to protect and cherish the earth. I believe that a true ecology will include opportunities for a sustained interaction with wild places, a renewed sense of responsibility, and encounters with a wild spirit. Without access to wilderness, we stand in danger of forgetting our souls and becoming less than human. The stories in this study suggest that wilderness has the potential for recalling a deep sense of belonging and connection that can make us whole again.

The Significance of Place

The locus for these stories was the Appalachian Trail. Seemingly endless tales have been shared about the place. The A.T. has the power to conjure up images in the minds of any thru-hiker or would-be hiker. The women in this study experienced the trail as larger than life. For some, the mere mention of Mt. Kathadin could elicit tears. Distinct memories and feelings were associated with place names such as the Hundred Mile Wilderness or Max Patch. Visual memories were so strong that the hikers could clearly recall details about a place many years later.

Midnight, like many thru-hikers, chose to live close to the trail in order to partake of its magic. Sirocco spoke of people who had moved cross-country just to be near the A.T.'s positive energy emanations. People seemed to behave differently there, even in places adjacent to it. Drivers routinely stopped to offer a ride to a dirty backpacker, something they would never do anywhere else. In the family of thru-hikers, many found

true community for the first time there, their vision of what the world could be. The experience is so powerful that some hike this trail or another again and again.

Roberts (1998) wrote about the role of place in the human spirit. Identification with place is part of belonging, a component of being human. Certain places, as a result of their history, exert a particularly strong influence on people. The A.T. is such a place for many, and it was for the women in this study.

In all cultures, some places are recognized as numinous, loaded with meaning and power. These particular locales come to be recognized as important or sacred because of the repeated stories that are told about them. (Roberts, 1998, p. 18)

Opportunities for a transformation in consciousness seemed to arise as the thru-hikers stepped away from the routine of everyday life and entered the numinous space of wilderness. They discovered what mattered there as they submitted to a process of inner change. Their thru-hike became an invitation to the contemplative state. Removed from a familiar and predictable world, their eyes were opened, and the voice of Spirit could again be heard (Roberts, 1998).

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage.
- Adirondack Mountain Club (1980). *Guide to the Northville-Placid Trail*. Glens Falls, NY: Adirondack Mountain Club.
- Altschuler, S. (2004). *The mindful hiker: On the trail to find the path*. Camarillo, CA: DeVorss.
- Anderson, R. (1998a). *Celtic oracles: A new system for spiritual growth and divination*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Anderson, R. (1998b). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson, *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69-94). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Anderson, R. (2000). Intuitive inquiry: Interpreting objective and subjective data. *ReVision: Journal of consciousness and transformation*. 22(4), 31-39.
- Anderson, R. (2002). Embodied writing: Presencing the body in somatic research, Part I, What is embodied writing? *Somatics: Magazine/Journal of the Mind/Body Arts and Sciences*, 13(4), 40-44.
- Anderson, R. (2004a). *The body map of human development*. Course #9790 ITP Global Program. Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Transpersonal Psychology.
- Anderson, R. (2004b). *The interplay of body and psyche in human development*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Appalachian Trail Conference (2004). *Milestones and noteworthy hikers*. Retrieved June 6, 2004, from http://www.appalachiantrail.org/hike/thru_hike/facts.html
- Brach, T. (2003). *Radical acceptance: Embracing your life with the heart of a Buddha*. New York: Bantam/Dell.
- Braud, W. (1998a). An expanded view of validity. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 213-237). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Braud, W. (1998b). Integral inquiry: Complementary ways of knowing, being, and expression. In W. Braud & R. Anderson, *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 35-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Braud, W. (2004). An introduction to organic inquiry: Honoring the transpersonal and spiritual in research and praxis. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 18-25.
- Braud, W., & Anderson, R. (1998). Conventional and expanded views of research. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 3-26). Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Braud, W., Dufrechou, J., Raynolds, P., & Schroeter, W. (2000). *A six-facet approach to assessing whole person learning and transformative changes in a graduate transpersonal psychology program*. Working Paper No. 2000-1, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology: Palo Alto, CA.
- Brill, D. (1990). *As far as the eye can see: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail hiker*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press.
- Brulatour, M. *Legacy of Transcendentalism: Religion and Philosophy*. Retrieved November, 9, 2003, from <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/roots/legacy/leg-rel>
- Burke, P. (1983). *Women in transition: Therapeutic ritual in the wilderness*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Burt, E. A. (1932). *The metaphysical foundation of modern science* (Rev. ed). New York: Anchor.
- Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces* (2nd ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, J. (Ed.). (1971). *The portable Jung*. (R.F.C. Hull, Trans.). New York: Viking Press.
- Clements, J. (1992). *An investigation of the modern day vision quest as a transformative spiritual experience*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Menlo Park (currently Palo Alto), CA.
- Clements, J. (1994-95, Winter). Organic research: An introduction. *ITP Dissertation Express Newsletter*, 2(2), 6-9.
- Clements, J. (2000). *Organic inquiry: Theory*. Unpublished manuscript, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology: Palo Alto, CA
- Clements, J. (2003). *Organic inquiry: Research in partnership with Spirit*. Unpublished manuscript.

- Clements, J. (2004). Organic inquiry: Toward research in partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26-49.
- Clements, J., Ettling, D., Jenett, D., & Shields, L. (1998). Organic research: Feminine spirituality meets transpersonal research. In *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience* (pp. 114-127). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clift, J. D. & Clift, W. B. (1996). *The archetype of pilgrimage: Outer action with inner meanings*. New York: Paulist.
- Clinebell, H. (1996). *Ecotherapy: Healing ourselves, healing the earth*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Cohen, M. J. (1997). *Reconnecting with nature: Finding wellness through restoring your bond with the earth*. Corvallis, OR: Ecopress.
- Cumes, D. (1998). *Inner passages, outer journeys: Wilderness, healing, and the discovery of self*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications.
- Dallett, J. (1988). *When the spirits come back*. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books.
- Devall, B., & Sessions, G. (1993). Deep ecology: Living as if nature mattered. In R. Walsh and F. Vaughn (Eds.), *Paths beyond ego: The transpersonal vision* (pp. 242-245). New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Dowdall, S. (1998). Roots of the spirit: Interrelationships among ecological actions and attitudes, nature-related exceptional human experiences, spirituality, and well-being. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 59(05), 2446B. (UMI No. 9833350)
- Drury, N. (1999). *Exploring the labyrinth: Making sense of the new spirituality*. New York: Continuum.
- Dufrechou, J. P. (2003). Coming home to nature through the body: An intuitive inquiry into experiences of grief, weeping or other deep emotions in response to nature. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 63(03), 1549B. (UMI No. 3047959).
- Durning, A. T. (1995). Are we happy yet? In T. Rozak, M. E. Gomes, & A. D. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind* (pp. 68-76). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Esbjorn-Hargens, V. & Anderson, R. (in press). Intuitive inquiry: An exploration of embodiment among contemporary female mystics. In C.T. Fischer (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods for psychology: Instructive case studies*. Philadelphia: Elsevier.

- Estes, C. P. (1992). *Women who run with the wolves: Myths and stories of the wild woman archetype*. New York: Ballantine.
- Foster, S. & Little, M. (1989). *The roaring of the sacred river: The wilderness quest for vision and self healing*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Fox, W. (1990). Transpersonal ecology: Psychologizing eco-philosophy. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 22(1), 59-96.
- Fox, W. (1993). Transpersonal ecology. In R. Walsh & F. Vaughan (Eds.), *Paths beyond ego: The transpersonal vision* (pp. 240-241). New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Gaynor, D. (1999). Changes in cognitive structure associated with experiences of spiritual transformation. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60(05), 2378B. (UMI No. 9932120)
- Gauthier, J. (2003). Midlife journeys of transvaluation and meeting the feminine through heroic descent: An organic inquiry with 10 men and 8 women. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64(06), 2957B. (UMI No. 3095411)
- Glendinning, C. (1994). *My name is Chellis & I'm in recovery from Western civilization*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Glassman, S. B. (1995). The experience of women discovering wilderness as psychologically healing. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56(04), 2325B. (UMI No. 9524674)
- Gorte, R. (1964). *Wilderness: Overview and statistics* (94-976 ENR). Washington, DC: Bureau of Land Management.
- Greenway, R. (1995). On crossing and not crossing the wilderness boundary. In V. Martin & N. Tyler (Eds.), *Fifth World Wilderness Conference, 1993, Norway*. Golden, CO: North American Press.
- Hanlon, D. (1998). Who walks? In D. Hanlon & I. Grand (Eds.) *The body in psychotherapy: Inquiries in somatic psychology* (pp. 1-16). Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Hart, T. (2000). Transformation as process and paradox. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 32(2), 157-164.
- Hastings, A. (2004, July). *Altered States of Consciousness*. Presentation at the ITP Global Program, Mount Madonna Conference Center, Watsonville, CA.
- Havlick, M.J. (Ed.) (2001). *The archetype of initiation: Sacred space, ritual process, and personal transformation. Lectures and Essays by Robert L. Moore*. Xlibris.

- Heilbrun, C. G. (1988). *Writing a woman's life*. New York: Ballantine.
- Hendee, J. C., & Pitstick, R. (1995). The use of wilderness for personal growth and inspiration. In V. Martin & N. Tyler (Eds.), *Fifth World Wilderness Congress, 1993, Norway*. Golden, CO: North American Press.
- Hillman, J. (1995). A psyche the size of the earth. In T. Roszak, M. Gomes, & A. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind* (pp. xvii-xxiii). San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Hillman, J. & Ventura, M. (1992). *We've had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world's getting worse*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Houston, Jean. (1987). *The search for the beloved: Journeys in mythology and sacred psychology*. Tarcher: Los Angeles.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Imber, J. A. (1995). The experience of psychospiritual transformation: A heuristic investigation. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 55(11), 3453A. (UMI No. 9509999)
- Jacobsen, T. (1976). *The treasures of darkness: A history of Mesopotamian religion*. London: Yale University Press.
- Johnson, R. (2005). Back to Buck Mountain. *A.T. Journeys*, 1(1), 11-15.
- Jung, C. G. (1956). *Symbols of transformation* (R.F.C. Hull, Trans.). New York: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (1959). *The archetypes and the collective unconscious* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). New York: Princeton University Press.
- Just a closer walk with me. (2005, June 11), *Toronto Globe and Mail*, p, D27.
- Kaye, R. W. (2000). The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: An exploration of the meanings embodied in America's last great wilderness. *USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P*, 15(2), 73-80.
- Kornfield, J. (1993). *A path with heart: A guide through the promises and perils of spiritual life*. New York: Bantam Books.

- Kuhn R. (2001). Sailing as a transformative experience. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 62(04), 2113B. (UMI No.3011294)
- Legault, M.(1992) Phenomenological study of wilderness experience and human development. In Henderson, C. (Ed.) *Coalition for education in the outdoors: Research symposium proceedings, January 17-19, 1992, Bradford Woods, Indiana* (pp. 95-96). Cortland, New York: The Coalition for Education in the Outdoors.
- Macy, J. (1991). *World as lover, world as self*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1999). *Toward a psychology of being* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Mathews, F. (1988). Conservation and self-realization: A deep ecology perspective. *Environmental Ethics*, 10, 347-55.
- McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Metzner, R. (1980). Ten classical metaphors of self-transformation. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 12(1), 47-62.
- Metzner, R. (1986). *The unfolding self: Varieties of transformative experience*. Novato, CA: Origin Press.
- Metzner, R. (1995). The psychopathology of the human-nature relationship. In T. Roszak, M. Gomes, & A. Kanner (Eds.), *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind* (pp. 55-67). San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Mueser, R. (1998). *Long distance hiking: Lessons from the Appalachian Trail*. Camden, MN: Ragged Mountain Press.
- Murdock, M. (1990). *The heroine's journey*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Naess, A. (1987). Self-realization: An ecological approach to being in the world. *The Trumpeter*, 4(3), 35-42.
- Oliver, M. (1986). *Dream work*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Peng, T. (1993). Meditation and psychospiritual transformation: A phenomenological study of Ch'an Buddhism and Christian mysticism (Ch'an Buddhism, Zen

- Buddhism). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 54(11), 5928B. (UMI No. 9410357)
- Plotkin, B. (2003). *Soulcraft: Crossing into the mysteries of nature and psyche*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Riordan, L. (2002). Bringing the wilderness home: Integrating the transformative aspects of adventure into everyday life. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 63(09), 4384B. (UMI No. 3066242)
- Roberts, E.J. (1998). Place and the human spirit. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 26, 5-34.
- Ross, C. (1982). *A woman's journey on the Appalachian Trail*. Chester, CN: Globe Pequot Press.
- Ruumet, H. (1997). Pathways of the soul: A helical model of psychospiritual transformation. *Presence: The Journal of Spiritual Directors International*, 3(3), 6-24.
- Sabini, M. (Ed.). (2002). *The earth has a soul: The nature writings of C. G. Jung*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.
- Segal, F. *Essays: Ecopsychology and the uses of wilderness*. (n.d) Retrieved March 21, 2004, from <http://ecopsychology.athabascau.ca/1097/segal.htm>.
- Smith, M. C. (2002). Health, healing, and the myth of the hero journey. *Advanced Nursing Science*, 24(4), 1-13.
- Snyder, G. (1990). *The practice of the wild*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker Hoard.
- Snyder, M. (2004a, March 12). Hikers tackling Appalachian Trail. *Cumberland Times News*, 1C-2C.
- Snyder, M. (2004b, October 8). Together on three. *Cumberland Times News*, 1C-2C.
- Taylor, N. (1996). *Women's experience of the descent into the underworld: The path of Inanna. A feminist and heuristic inquiry*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.
- Washburn, M. (1995). *The ego and the dynamic ground: A transpersonal theory of human development*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Washburn, M. (1999). Embodied spirituality in a sacred world. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 27(2), 133-172.

- Washburn, M. (2003). *Embodied spirituality in a sacred world*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- White, R. A. (1997). Dissociation, narrative, and exceptional human experience. In S. Krippner & S. Powers (Eds.), *Broken images, broken selves: Dissociative narratives in clinical practice* (pp. 88-212). Washington, DC: Brunner-Mazel.
- White, R. A. (1998). Becoming more human as you work: The reflexive role of the exceptional human experience. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences* (pp. 128-145). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wilber, K. (1993). The pre/trans fallacy. In Walsh, R. & Vaughan, F. (Eds.), *Paths beyond ego: The transpersonal vision*. (pp. 124-130). New York: Tarcher/Putnam.
- Wilber, K. (1999). Spirituality and developmental lines: Are there stages? *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 31(1), 1-10.
- Winters, K. (2001). *Walking home: A woman's pilgrimage on the Appalachian Trail*. Los Angeles: Alyson.
- Wuthnow, R. (2002). *Interview: Robert Wuthnow*. Retrieved April 26, 2002, from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week534/rwuthnow.html>
- Zequeira-Russell, B. (2002). Wilderness and spirituality: Hikers' experience of God in the backcountry. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64(09), 401B.(UMI No. 3078656)
- Zimmerman, M. E. (1993). Heidegger, Buddhism and deep ecology. In C. B. Guignon (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Heidegger* (pp. 240-269). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

Dear _____

I am conducting a study on the transformative experiences of women thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail. The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA, is sponsoring the study. This topic has great personal meaning to me. If you believe that thru-hiking the trail has changed you, you may make a good candidate for this study. To participate you must be a woman 21 years of age or older who has walked the trail end-to-end during a single year in the past 15 years.

I am looking for individuals who believe they have been changed on many levels as a result of their hike. Have you experienced a change in your self and your life that could be characterized as persistent, wide reaching and profound? Personal transformation seems to result in greater self-awareness, a deeper connection with something beyond self, and a commitment to the service of others. You may have noticed that what matters to you since your hike has changed. You may feel that you are more in touch with your unique gifts. Perhaps you have come to know something in a deep way as a result of your experience.

There are three phases to this study. During the next two or three months, the study will require from 9-12 hours from the participants. Those selected will engage in a number of activities to aid in a recollection of their A.T. experience. Before we meet, I will mail a demographic questionnaire, a consent form, and instructions on how to write about an experience with wilderness. This kind of writing experience is expected to take approximately 1 hour. The total time to complete the forms and the writing exercise for this first phase of the study will be 60 minutes to two hours.

I will also encourage each person to review any materials saved from the experience that could help reveal the depth of her transformative experience. Mementos might include a trail journal, sketches, letters, poetry, original artwork, photographs, or music composed about the experience. I will make arrangements for each woman to meet me to tell her story. Each participant will be asked to walk with me for approximately 30 minutes before I audiotape her story. It will take approximately 90 minutes for the walk and storytelling session.

The second phase of this study will consist of a group meeting of the participants at a mutually agreed upon location (close to the A.T.) approximately two months after the individual interview. It will be an occasion to share our stories, identify themes, create a group story, and celebrate together. This gathering will require about 3 hours. If some participants are unable to attend, every attempt will be made to have them join the group by telephone. It is expected that all the experiences will take place beginning in mid-April 2005 and conclude by June.

If you believe you are a candidate and would like to participate, I invite you to respond to me by mail or email (see addresses below) stating your intention and telephone contact

information. As soon as I hear from you, I will phone to answer any questions you may have, confirm your eligibility, and arrange to send you a packet of information.

My postal mail address is:

Merry Coburn
Hunter Student Development Center
Alfred State College
Alfred, New York 14802

My email address is: chrysalis@frontiernet.net

I look forward to our potential partnership in this important work.

Sincerely,

Merry Coburn, M.S., Doctoral Candidate
Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

Appendix B: Letter of Gratitude

Dear _____,

I want to express my deep appreciation for your willingness to participate in this study. Sharing the details of an immensely significant and personal experience represents a priceless gift to others. Your story may inspire the readers of this study to embark on a similar journey. The generous contribution of time you are making is gratefully acknowledged.

Wilderness walking holds deep meaning for me, and I am especially eager to hear your story. I hope that you will experience a rekindling of the transformative spirit of your thru-hike by telling your story. In hearing it, others may be moved to honor the earth and to preserve wilderness for its own sake as well as for those whose steps follow yours.

This research packet contains several pieces. Please review them carefully. I will be in contact with you soon to discuss the next steps.

With sincere thanks,

Merry Coburn, Researcher

Appendix C: Consent Form

To the participant in this research:

You are invited to participate in a study exploring your experience of transformation while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. You will be asked to share your story with me individually and with a small group of other women thru-hikers participating in the study.

I hope that this research will illuminate the nature of wilderness walking and its role in psychological and spiritual transformation. Your participation in the study may serve as an opportunity for you to deepen your own understanding of the experience you had on the trail. It will also give you an opportunity to share with other women who feel they have experienced transformation on the A.T. Participation in the study has the potential to expand your self-understanding and to further your personal growth.

The study design includes several activities in which you as a participant will engage over a period of the next 2 to 3 months. The time involved is estimated to be from 9 to 12 hours in total. You will initially be mailed this Consent Form, a brief Demographic Questionnaire, and instructions on how to complete an Embodied Writing Assignment about a time when you felt very close to nature while on the A.T. You will need to complete the two forms, plus the writing assignment, and mail them to me. I estimate the writing component will take you from one to two hours. Once I receive your forms, I will contact you to make arrangements to meet at a mutually agreed location to hear your story.

To help you recall the experience vividly, this interview will be preceded by a 30-minute meditative walk in nature. This meeting (taking a walk and telling your story) will

last approximately 1 1/2 hours. The interview will be audio-taped and later transcribed. I encourage you to bring any significant memorabilia such as journals, logs, letters, photos, or creative work related to your transformative experience. I would like to photograph these when we meet for inclusion in the study.

After all the individual sessions have been completed, you and the other participants will be invited to meet with me as a group (at a location adjacent to the A.T.) for a period of approximately 3 hours. If this is not possible, we will include you via telephone. Each person will be asked to share her experience with the other participants. At the gathering I will also invite you to choose from a series of images or to create an image that best portrays your experience without using words. I will present my preliminary version of a group transformation story. You will be encouraged to provide feedback about its accuracy or any needed changes. The gathering will conclude by celebrating our experience. I encourage you to consider contributing original songs, poetry, stories, art work, photographs, or any other expression of your A.T. experience. I would like to photograph any creative works from our celebration for inclusion in the study.

All material obtained from you, including the audio-taped interview, will be stored securely in a locked cabinet in my office. All materials will be kept confidential as to their source, and your identity will be protected. A fictitious name of your choice will be used to further ensure your privacy. Only the person completing the transcription of your interview and I will have access to the original, audio-taped material. The transcriber will also sign an agreement of confidentiality.

This study has been designed to minimize potential risks to you. Should you for any reason experience distress as a result of sharing your experience, I encourage you to call me and I will make every effort to help you process any uncomfortable feelings or issues and/or to make an appropriate referral for therapeutic support. If you have any questions or concerns, you are encouraged to call me at (607) 587-4500 or my Chairperson, Irene Lazarus, Ph.D. (919) 960-8333 or send an email to the Chairperson of the Global Ethics Committee for Research, Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D. at randerson@itp.edu.

If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time during the conduct of the study and for any reason without penalty or prejudice. If you would like to receive a summary of my research findings after the study is completed, please include your address with your signature below. You will be given a copy of your personal story of transformation, copies of any photos of creative work or artifacts used in the study, and a copy of the final group story.

I attest that I have read and understand this form, have had the study explained by the primary researcher and had any questions answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the conduct of the study. My participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Further, no pressure has been applied to encourage my participation.

My signature indicates my willingness to be a participant in this research under the conditions set forth above.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Address (optional) _____

I want all information that refers to my participation in this study to be identified using the following fictitious name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire

Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

Palo Alto, CA
Merry Coburn, ResearcherWalking in Wilderness:
Women's Transformative Experience on the Appalachian Trail

(Please Print)

1. Name: _____
2. Address: _____
3. Telephone: _____
4. Email address: _____
5. Current age: _____
6. Age during A.T. thru-hike: _____
7. Date you began your A.T. thru-hike: _____
8. Date you ended your A.T. thru-hike: _____
9. Number of months it took you to thru-hike the A.T.: _____
10. Ethnicity:
 - ☐ Asian American
 - ☐ Black/African American
 - ☐ Caucasian/White
 - ☐ Hispanic/Latina
 - ☐ Jewish
 - ☐ Native American
 - ☐ Multi-Racial
 - ☐ Other: _____
11. Religious Preference:
 - ☐ Buddhist
 - ☐ Catholic
 - ☐ Christian/Protestant

- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ None

12. Relationship Status:

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Committed Relationship/Partner
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Other: _____

13. Highest level of education:

- ☐ Attended high school
- ☐ High school degree
- ☐ 2-year college degree
- ☐ 4-year college degree
- ☐ Graduate degree

14. Sexual orientation: _____

15. Occupation: _____

16. Briefly describe your wilderness experiences prior to thru-hiking the A.T.:

Time/Date I can contact you for follow-up information: _____

Please return this form in the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Appendix E: Interview protocol

Thank you for being willing to share this remarkable experience with me. I will be audio-taping your story so that it can be transcribed later and no part of it will be lost. Are you comfortable and ready to begin? We will be talking for about 90 minutes.

Invocation

Sharing stories of transformation has a sacred quality to it. I'd like to begin by reading a poem by Morgan Farley (1998) that appeared by permission of the author in Plotkin's (2003) book, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the mysteries of psyche* (p. 212). It seems to me to invite a return to wilderness.

Clearing

I am clearing a space—
here, where the trees stand back.
I am making a circle so open
the moon will fall in love
and stroke these grasses with her silver.

I am setting stones in the four directions,
stones that have called my name
from mountaintops and riverbeds, canyons and mesas.
Here I will stand with my hands empty,
mind gaping under the moon.

I know there is another way to live.
When I find it, the angels
will cry out in rapture,
each cell of my body
will be a rose, a star.

If something seized my life tonight,
if a sudden wind swept through me,
changing everything,
I would not resist.
I am ready for whatever comes.

But I think it will be
something small, an animal

padding out from the shadows,
or a word spoken so softly
I hear it inside.

It is dark out here, and cold.
The moon is stone.
I am alone with my longing.
Nothing is happening
but the next breath, and the next...

Morgan Farley, 1998

Please take a few moments to make yourself comfortable. Allow yourself to close your eyes, settle your body on the earth, and tune into the rhythm of your breath as it moves in and out of your body. The wilderness has just given you a reminder of a significant experience that took place while you walked the A.T. Allow it to recreate that experience for you in your mind's eye, including as much rich detail as possible.

(Pause)

When you are ready, open your eyes.

Opening question:

Can you describe the object or feature from our walk that seemed to speak to you? Why was it chosen and what is its meaning for you?

Primary questions:

1. Please tell me the story of the A.T. hike, highlighting the part or parts that were particularly transformative for you.
2. Were there times or events when you recognized that a fundamental shift had taken place in your sense of self? Please describe these in as much detail as possible.

Possible follow-up questions:

1. After reflecting back on the experience, how has it affected your life since you returned home, including your life choices, your self-confidence? When you first returned? One month, one year later? Now?
2. What matters to you now in your life? How has it changed as a result of your time on the A.T.? How do you think about yourself in relation to the world and to other people since that time? How is it reflected in the way you live?
3. What have you learned about your talents or gifts and your core power as a result of your A.T. experience?
4. Is there something you have come to know in a deep way as a result of your experience on the A.T.? If so, how has it informed your life in the world?
5. Did anything that you couldn't explain occur on your hike? Could you describe the experience?
6. Have you found yourself engaged in any kind of creative work during or after your hike? If so, could you describe it and how you came to create it.

Exploration of artifacts

Please describe how the artifacts you've brought with you today speak to your experience of transforming.

1. What were the circumstances that led to their creation?
2. What is their significance for you?

Appendix F: Embodied writing instructions

Dear _____,

I hope you have experienced something very significant as a result of your thru-hike of the A.T. To help others understand your experience and perhaps to deepen your own recollection, I am suggesting a writing experience known as embodied writing. Please find a comfortable space where you can relax deeply. Being deeply relaxed will make it easier to recall an encounter you had with wilderness that was especially significant for you. You will be writing about it in a way that will feel as if you are there again.

Below is a sample of embodied writing.

I am walking down an unpaved country road with no expectations. Now I feel the presence of their eyes. Across the open field at the edge of the woods, they stand transfixed. I feel the touch of their eyes on my body. I recall this mysterious experience from other walks. The herd of white-tailed deer hesitates and then bounds off into the woods. It is springtime. There is the sweet smell of apple blossoms everywhere, a recollection of the endless cycle of rebirth. Suddenly the world wraps itself around me with the soft tenderness of a lover, very close and intimate. The experience is so surprising and sudden that tears fill my eyes, my breathing quickens, and sobs rack my chest. I know something fundamental has shifted. I am no longer alone.

Characteristics of embodied writing include:

- writing in the first person
- allowing others to experience the event with you from the inside and outside
- including rich sensory details: what did you see, hear, feel, touch, taste?
- allowing time to slow down
- including the feeling or the body's experience of an event to be told
- telling the story from the inside out. What did you experience?

Before you begin, you may wish to spend some time revisiting any personally meaningful mementos of your hike or any related creative work. Read the instructions below a couple of times when you are ready to begin. You will need to have paper and pencil or pen nearby.

Instructions:

Sit in a quiet and relaxed space where you will not be interrupted for 30 minutes. Begin by closing your eyes and focusing on your breathing until you feel deeply relaxed. Allow your mind to return to your hiking experience on the A.T. Encourage it to show you those experiences vividly as a series of distinct memories. Let your senses partake fully in each experience. Notice the colors, feel the temperature of the air, notice the sounds and smells, the textures of your surrounding and any tastes you might have experienced.

Now focus on one specific occasion when you felt especially close to nature. Take some time to absorb all the sensual details. When it feels almost as if you are there again, gradually open your eyes and begin writing about the experience, being careful to include all the sensual details that were present at that time.

Please return your writing to me in the self- addressed, stamped envelope within the next week. Also include your completed Informed Consent Form and Demographic Data Form in the same envelope. I will be contacting you about a date and location for your interview as soon as I receive these.

I very much look forward to our meeting.

Sincerely,

Merry J Coburn, M.S., N.C.C.
Doctoral candidate

Appendix G: Recruitment Advertisement

Women A.T. thru-hikers needed

I am conducting a doctoral research study in psychology on the power of wilderness to transform lives. It is a chance to relive the meaning your A.T. thru-hiking experience has had for you through storytelling. The research will be conducted between April and June of 2005. If you are a woman 21 years of age or older who has thru-hiked the A.T. within the past 15 years, please contact Merry Coburn at chrysalis@frontiernet.net or by phoning (607) 587-8790 for further information.

Appendix H: Transcriber's Confidentiality Statement

I have agreed to complete the transcription of audiotapes that are part of a research study being conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology.

I understand that all information included in the audiotapes is to be kept confidential including the actual names of participants. I will keep the materials (audiotapes and transcripts) in a secure location during the time they are in my care. The transcription will be completed in such a way that no one except myself can hear the contents of the tapes.

My signature below indicates that I agree to keep confidential the identity of each participant and as well as all information from the study. I also agree to store the audiotapes and transcripts in a secure location while they are in my care.

Signature of transcriber

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix I: Creative Expression and Trail Artifacts

Participants were asked for contributions of their creative work and any trail artifacts that might convey their experience. Some contributions were excluded because they clearly identified a participant. Only a portion of the materials submitted were included due to the page limitations imposed by a dissertation. I believe that these selections are representative of the larger document.

Midnight

From her book: My life was pretty stable and a lot of people would say I had it all. A 36-year-old single homemaker, a wonderful family, a good job, nice car, friends, what else could I want? I often wondered that myself, but the sudden death of a very dear friend after a brief battle with cancer left me taking a very hard look at life. Before her death, Joelle and I would discuss my dream of “some day” thru-hiking the trail, something that seemed impossible to do at the time, but she would always encourage me to do it. She would say, “Don’t wait till tomorrow, tomorrow may never come.” I remembered those words the more I thought of the trail, but how could I possibly quit my job and hike for six months, and what if I failed? When I admitted myself into the hospital for treatment, I was told I was lucky to be alive. I had burned all the muscle in my body from constant exercise including my heart. I was a time bomb, waiting to go off. I believe that God gave me a second chance in life for a reason, and as ridiculous as it may sound to some people, I believe it was to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Nuppi

Figure 11. Nuppi's photograph of a water garden she designed and constructed.



From her book: The door opened. Except for the dust, dirt, and dead insects, the tiny room was nearly empty. “Hey, you guys. Look at this! A place to sleep.”

Rain and Snail peered over my shoulder. Feeling a sense of urgency, I got the boys moving. “There’s a broom. I’ll sweep; you guys move the gear. Let’s get in here before anyone comes. Look! A light switch! Electricity! We’ll be in high cotton tonight!” I grabbed the broom while the guys gathered up the equipment.

The dead bugs and spiders went out the door but the crickets were quite upset with having their home disrupted. They hopped erratically around the floor to escape the broom. The space was barely wide enough for us to spread out mats, but we were so ecstatic about being out of the cold and out of plain view that cramped quarters were inconsequential.

Buzz

End of the Retreat

Heart Open,
 Spine Straight,
 Breathe in, Breathe out.
 No coming,
 No going,
 No Birth,
 No Death.
 Expansion-Contraction
 What is the value of Zero to the nth power?

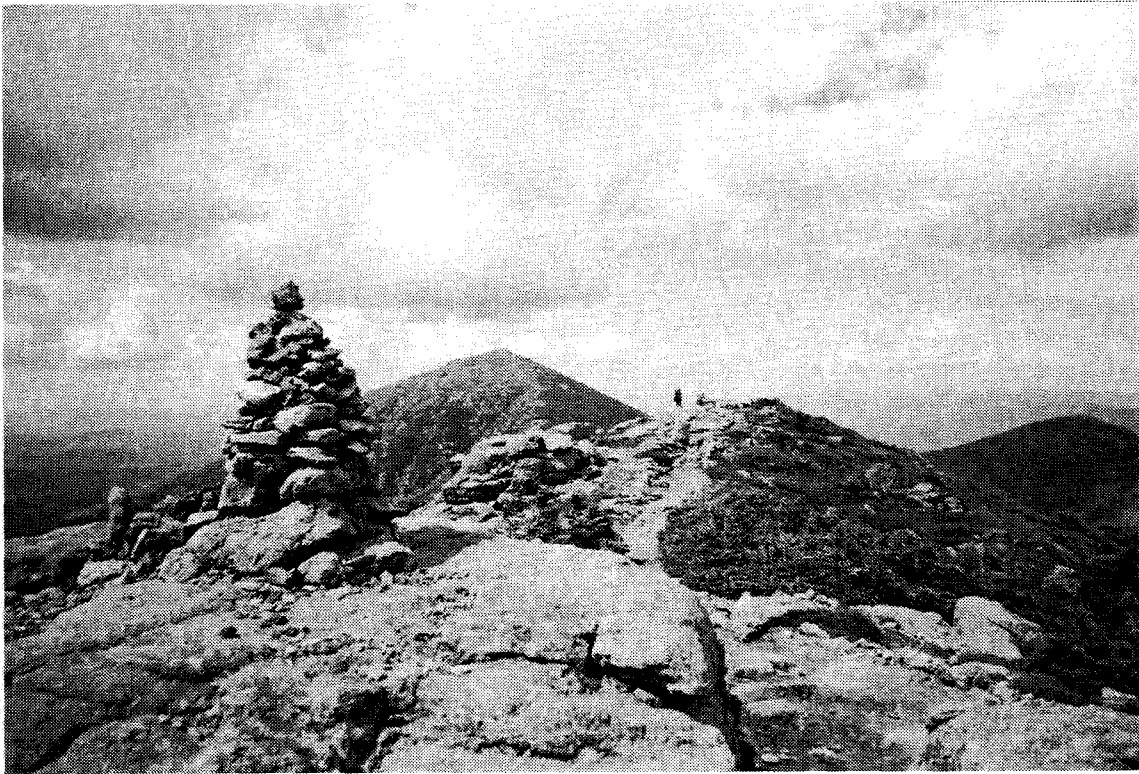
Groovy

From a recently published article: I never thought seriously of quitting during my quest. Through the highs and lows, I considered my time on the Trail a gift and found so much more than what I'd set out to find. Standing before the famous sign atop Katahdin was fantastic and surreal, as it likely is for all who have waked their own journeys to get there. A mixture of emotions swept me: a tearful surge of pride and thanks, triumph, and strength in the knowledge that all things are possible. Ascending that last, magnificent peak was never my true goal. Instead, it was always to experience each moment and every step, new friendship, place, sensation, and emotion along the way.

Figure 12. Cadence's A.T. photos.



Figure 13. Cadence's A. T. photo.



Sirocco

From chapter 1 of a novel in progress: At first their rhyming names, Avis and Mavis, elicited taunts from their classmates, pushing the two girls together in spite of themselves. Avis was made rudely aware that the popularity she had taken for granted as Merry's friend was cheap currency compared to her worth as a target. She vowed that if she managed to regain neutral social status ever again, she would be content with a quiet spot just outside the limelight...not in the dark of course, but reflected light would suffice. *Fortunately*, and Avis was ashamed to say that she still thought in these terms, it was soon revealed that the death of Mavis's older brother, Ellis, had precipitated her family's move from Maine to New Jersey. Miss Kay, their teacher, had informed them of

this tragedy after sending Mavis on a spurious mission to the principal's office, whereupon their tormenters' enthusiasm quickly faded to a guilty awe.

During the following summer, in an effort to differentiate herself from Mavis and put an end to the teasing, Avis had permanently become Tip, a nickname her father called her from time to time. Tip derived from Hot Tip, a convoluted pun designed to annoy her mother. Babe had christened Avis for her name's meaning in French, hoping to give her daughter, Avis LeBon, "de bon conseil," or common sense, the quality she felt she had lacked in her decision to abandon her native land for Sergeant Samson LeBon of Winton, Alabama after the liberation of France. Anyone hoping for a chuckle with the "we try harder" line from Babe LeBon got only a sniff and a glare for his trouble. Samson, who spoke not a word of French, insisted "de bon conseil" could be translated as "a hot tip." Much to Babe's dismay, Avis became Tip to all but her mother and Merry Fischl from that summer on.

The following is an excerpt from the final chapter: A few minutes later Tip reached a sharp bend in the trail. "Okay," she said swinging with the trail to the right. It had become her habit to converse with the trail out loud like an animate being. She stopped and backed up. "Mavis?" she called. "Is that you?" Mavis's pack leaned against a stump at the end of an alley of short pines stopping abruptly at the scrim of fervid blue sky. Tip donned her glasses and pushed her way through the plumy branches of the evergreens. "Let me know if you're decent, ok?" she called as she neared the end. There was no response. She stopped next to the pack. "Wow, great view," she said. "I hope we're stopping soon." She stood on an outcrop 4,000 feet above the State of Maine, which extended westward toward Canada in gentle waves, cloaked in dense green forest,

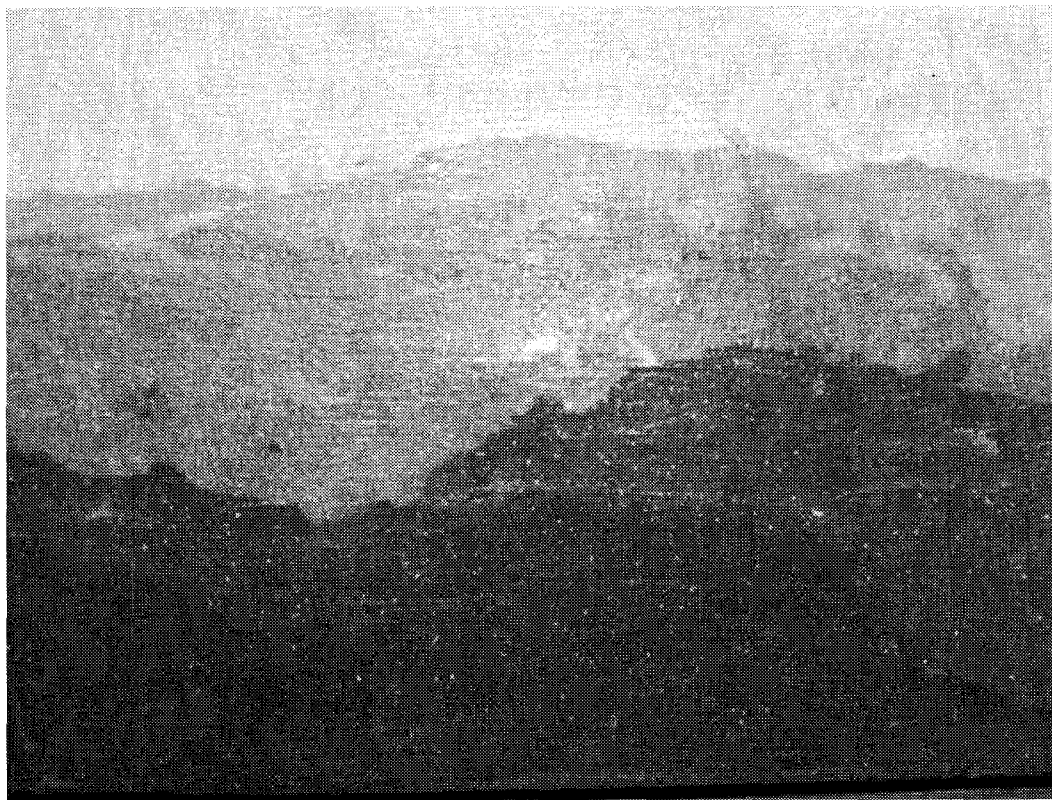
interrupted by gray expanses of lake without a trace of human habitation. She glanced off to the right where the trail spun out onto the saddle 500 feet below, linking the peak they were descending with the next one they would climb, a mile or so away. She groaned. How many more to go? Her thoughts returned to the ostrich – where *was* Mavis - but she was distracted again by two figures threading their way through the stunted pines on the saddle below, “Hey, look, it’s that pervert, Guyot...and um,” she pushed her glasses up and squinted, “somebody small. Ooh, a female. What woman in her right mind would hike with *him*?”

Her eyes dropped to the scree directly beneath her perch. “Oh my god,” she said and stepped back. She stood for a moment holding her breath, as if holding her breath might make everything stop, rewind, go back. Directly below, the drop became a steep rockslide, giant chunks of granite spilling downhill for two hundred feet or so into a stretch of tiny gnarled spruce where the slope flattened out. Staring straight ahead into the relentless blue sky, her eyes saw nothing but the imprint of the scene below, a negative etched on the retina in reverse: white rocks, glowing from within with a mysterious boiling light, and a horrible, dark, disheveled little form, which Tip instantly saw in fetal curl even though it hadn’t been that way at all, but sprawled out in odd display, arms and legs liberated from all natural configuration as in a drawing by a child. And blood. Was there blood? She didn’t know. She didn’t want to know. Her mind skipped on the thought of blood over and over again like a broken record.

She didn’t know how long she stood there staring into the vacuous blue sky until weird little sounds began to distract her: chokes and squeaks and clicks. They were coming from somewhere nearby, some weird static, as made by power lines in the rain, or

maybe some animal. The ostrich came to mind, its grunt of surprise. Something's making pitiful sounds, she thought. And then she squeaked, "it's me."

Figure 14. Bernadette's blue ceramic tile.



GottaHike!

From her book: I pulled out the rice and beans, lit my stove, and settled down to honor my own body. I decided to stay put. It pleased me to honor my own body and stop for the night. It was a turning point for me, and though I felt unnerved to be discontinuing my hike with Jed, I experienced an extraordinary sense of freedom, as well. Our interactions had become more and more strained and his comments to me and about me often left me feeling bruised and disrespected.

I would have to get through the Wilderness on my own, and climb Katahdin alone. It was sad, in a way, but I was relieved more than worried by the change in events. But, I could do it at my own pace. I could reclaim my hike, and do it my way...

The day began with overcast skies and rain in the air. The climb up and then down Chairback Mountain, so steep and formidable the night before, was unremarkable in the morning; I scaled the peak with ease. Beginning to feel better about being on my own, I congratulated myself for making the wise decision to stay at the lean-to.

My bravado was short lived, however. I promptly lost the white blazes making the AT and, for the first time in a long time on the trail, had a feeling of panic. All of a sudden it was crystal clear: no one knew or cared where I was; if I became lost, no one would miss me for at least a week...

It began to drizzle; I pulled out my pack cover and raingear and covered it up just before a deluge drenched me within minutes. It was not the kind of rain that looked like it would stop any time soon. I slogged on.

Trail Artifacts

The items below were taken from trail logs or were felt to be significant memorabilia from the trail by their owner.

Nuppi

Notations from her April trail journal: My grandmother and father's spirit move through the fog to settle my soul. Trees, embraced with symbols of love, warm my heart. Only a line distinguishes me from the trees, mountains, and sky. The snow and cold of the night before reaching the quarter mile point gave way, to appreciate the company of a

male hiker, of sunshine at a restaurant and the taste of hot food. Strangers become friends and promise support. I must believe them.

Sissu

Figure 15. Sisu's new hiking stick.

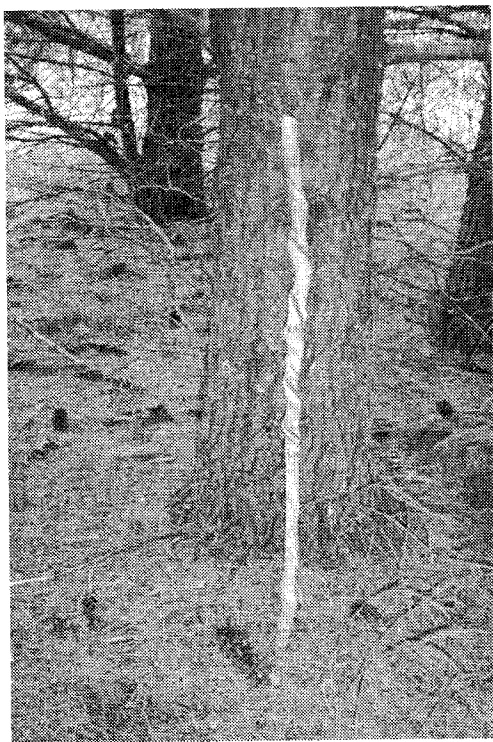


Figure 16. Sisu's gift of gratitude from a 12-year-old thru-hiker.



Jamie

Trail log dated June 1, 1992: Everything is very green, a spring green. The azaleas, rhododendrons, and mountain laurel are adding touches of brilliant color to the greens with their blossoms. Also, the blossoms on the berry bushes add a lot to the surrounding color scheme. At times now the trail is very narrow due to the vegetation . . . This is ok except when the vegetation includes stinging nettles, berry bushes, or poison ivy!!!

Tonight is my 60th night on the trail. If my trip consists of 180 nights, then I am one third of the way there. Living on the trail has become a way of life. Waking up each morning, packing up, hiking on, taking breaks, reaching a campsite, unpacking, evening chores, sleep etc. fills my days. Thinking of the days activities at night emphasizes how

full each day is. The morning seems so long from each evening. Town stops break up the days of hiking. But it is always good to step back on the trail after each town stop. The trip seems to be more of a mental challenge for everyone. Though I have low moments, mostly my mind is strong. I am still loving every moment, even the hard ones!