

THE EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY OF WOMEN WHO PRACTICE DISTANCE RUNNING

IN NATURE:

“I RUN IN THE COMPANY OF TREES AND OF CERTAIN FRIENDS”

by

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Abstract

The Embodied Spirituality of Women Who Practice Distance Running in Nature:

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This study explores women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. A transformative experience was defined as a distance running experience in nature that deepened or expanded a participant’s awareness of and connection to her self, others, the world, or the sacred, or was spiritual in some life-changing way. The research method used was intuitive inquiry, a hermeneutical approach to research that invites the researcher to begin with her own subjective experience and enter into potentially transformative dialogue with participants. Twenty-three women aged 28-64 described their transformative experiences while distance running in nature through the emotional and sensual viewpoint of the body using embodied writing, and responded in writing to interview questions that invited them to contextualize and make meaning of those experiences. Five Integrative Lenses identified indicate that (a) during a transformative experience while distance running in nature, a woman enters into two or more states of attunement—intrapersonal, interpersonal, trans-species, or trans-terra—that open a core spiritual sense of interconnectedness with her self, human others, animals, and the earth; (b) during a transformative experience while distance running in nature a woman’s transpersonal Self becomes present, opening her to moments of feeling filled with faith, gratitude, grace, and/or love, which may become sustained transpersonal traits in her life; (c) distance running in nature as a spiritual practice potentiates transformative processes of individuation, self-healing, and becoming animal (Abram, 2010) that

contribute to a woman's deepening embodiment and continuing psychospiritual development; (d) women who engage in distance running in nature as an ongoing spiritual practice cultivate a recognizable, embodied core spirituality; and (e) women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature, and participation in this study, generated a shift from an externalized spiritual authority to one that was embodied and participatory with nature as authoritative.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Topic

The purpose of this research study was to explore women's transformative experiences while engaged in distance running in nature. I examined these experiences primarily from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. Embodiment was understood as "a process of incarnation" (Corbett, 1996, p. 40) by which the transpersonal "Self gradually unfolds into spatiotemporal reality" (p. 40). Psychospiritual development referred to the interdependent personal and transpersonal growth processes that contribute to increasing wholeness and maturity within a human being (Corbett, 1996; Plotkin, 2008; Ruumet, 2006). By giving embodied narrative voice to women's self-identified experiences of transformation while distance running in nature, their self-defined spirituality, and their resulting psychospiritual growth, this study offered insight into the transformative quality of embodied spiritual practice, the development of feminine consciousness outside of traditional religious communities and practices, and the cultivation of women's personal spirituality in contemporary Western culture. This study considered the internal and external barriers, often related to interpersonal trauma or insecure attachment (Siegel, 1999), that occur when a child lacks a safe and secure bond with an early caregiver, which women may experience in evolving as psychological and spiritual persons. I anticipated that participants would reveal ways in which distance running in nature potentiates women's capacity to transform and transcend those barriers, and movement into an embodied spirituality expressed through transpersonal qualities such as self-love, authenticity, mindfulness, compassion, and service to others.

Thesis Statement and Research Objectives

My own transformative experiences while running in nature inspired many informal conversations with women who described experiences that resonated with mine, and my resulting desire to research women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. At the start of this study, no qualitative study had been conducted that explored: (a) the richness of these transformative experiences and what meaning women made of them; (b) considered how they might inform our understanding of the meditative and contemplative, and, thus, transformative, potential of distance running in nature in women's lives; (c) the physiological and emotional healing of trauma or insecure attachment for women through distance running in nature, and the relationship between distance running in nature, women's embodiment, and our psychospiritual development.

The primary questions this study sought to explore were: (a) In what ways does regular distance running in nature potentiate transformative experiences, and the transformational process, for a woman? (b) What internal and external barriers, including trauma and insecure attachment, do women face in evolving as psychological and spiritual persons, and how does distance running in nature serve as a catalyst or facilitator for transforming and transcending those barriers? (c) In what ways is a woman's embodiment and psychospiritual development impacted by transformative experience and the transformational process? and (d) What is the relationship between transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development among women for whom distance running in nature is a spiritual practice? One objective of this study was to create helpful metaphors, terms, and definitions for describing and communicating the experiences explored in this study, where none currently exist in the literature.

Research Design

Participants in this study were women age 28 and older who had traversed beyond the growth of adolescence and early adulthood, and were preparing to transition into their 30s or were entering into later stages of healing, balance, midlife, menopause, or wisdom (Borysenko, 1996). They were women who identified themselves as having had transformative experiences while distance running in nature, who had run for many years and identified running as a meditative or contemplative spiritual practice, or in some way central to their spiritual lives, and who had the capacity to articulate and reflect upon those experiences in relation to their embodiment and psychospiritual development using embodied writing (Anderson, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2011c). My hope was that the women participants would gain insight into, and experience a deepening and expanding of their own embodied spiritual lives, while contributing to our collective transpersonal understanding of how transformative experiences of distance running in nature impacted our embodiment and spiritual development.

To ensure participation in this study provided an opportunity for further transformation for the women involved and for me as a researcher, the primary method used was intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2011a, 2011b), an embodied approach to qualitative research that engages the researcher in multiple hermeneutical cycles to explore complex human experiences. The primary “texts” of this study were women’s narratives of their experiences, written by them using embodied writing (Anderson, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2011c) to convey the emotional and sensual experiences of the writer through the viewpoint of the body. A flyer was designed and posted on my personal Facebook page for distribution among “friends” and their “friends,” emailed to online communities oriented toward trail running, distance running, and women’s spirituality, and emailed to *Girls on the Run International* for distribution to affiliated

council leaders through their weekly email newsletter to recruit prospective participants. From responses received, 27 women age 28 or older were initially identified as potential participants through a phone-screen interview and invited to complete all data collection steps of the study by: (a) responding to three background questions in writing, (b) using embodied writing to describe at least one transformative experience while distance running in nature that had contributed to their embodiment or psychospiritual development, and (c) responding in writing to nine interview questions that contextualized, and further explored, the transformative experience(s) they wrote about, and how the experience(s) had changed their lives. The writings of 23 women who completed all, or in the case of one woman, two steps of the study are included in this report. I present and discuss findings using verbatim excerpts from their writings, and thematic content analysis and interpretation.

Fields of Inquiry Relevant to Research

Animal-based and human studies addressing the physiological and psychological effects of running have demonstrated that running stimulates neurogenesis in hippocampal and amygdal regions of the brain (Fabel & Kempermann, 2008; Greenwood & Fleshner, 2008; Liu et al., 2009; Pontifex, Hillman, Fernhall, Thompson, & Valentini, 2009; van Praag, 2008), stimulates altered states of consciousness and mood changes similar to that of sitting meditation (Harte, Eifert, & Smith, 1995; Solomon & Bumpus, 1978), prevents and reduces stress-related mood disorders like anxiety and depression in women (Doyne, Chambless, & Beutler, 1983; Doyne et al., 1987; Ossip-Klein et al., 1989), may be used by women to generally cope with difficult life circumstances (Leedy, 2009), and contributes to significant positive psychological changes in women's lives (Boudreau, 2009; Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010; Grant, 1987; Majcen, 2007).

None of the animal-based studies have effectively bridged our understanding of the neurobiological effects of running with the transformative effects on the human mind, body, or soul (Panksepp, 2009). They have provided a view into physiological changes that occur but have not revealed the texture or inner landscape of the lived experience. This study provided insight into the lived experience of the transformational process of distance running in nature among women for whom it is a spiritual practice, and helped us to understand the role conscious participation has in an individual's ongoing transformation while likely undergoing marked neurobiological changes. Like the animal studies, existing psychological studies that consider the beneficial, and even transformational, effects of running among their women participants, had yet to fully consider the interconnected transpersonal realms of transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development.

Research and literature addressing states of consciousness (Tart, 1990, 2000) and transformational processes provided a valuable foundation for this exploration of women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature. An extensive study of the nature of transformations in consciousness across religious and spiritual traditions offered a preliminary roadmap for understanding how regular practice creates a climate for peak experiences and their further integration (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Vieten, Vieten, Cohen, & Schlitz, 2008). Through clinical work using accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy, Fosha (2005, 2006, 2008, 2009) identified an emotion-based transformational process characterized by four states and three state transformations that also informed this study. Hart (2000) recognized that transformation functions as both process and paradox in creating space for the confounding or contradictory aspects of transformation, and space was held for both. In an effort to describe transformational experiences and processes, Metzner (1980) connected the most contemporary

and nontraditional experiences of transformation to 10 ancient metaphors for transformation, including “darkness to enlightenment” (p. 52), “imprisonment to liberation” (p. 53), and “fragmentation to wholeness” (p. 54), and his work on the varieties of transformative experience (Metzner, 2010) was invaluable for understanding the experiences explored in this study.

Spiral or dialectic models of transpersonal or psychospiritual development (Anderson, 2008; Esbjörn, 2003; Ruumet, 1997, 2006; Washburn, 1995, 2003) and the Jungian approach to women’s psychospiritual development explicated by Woodman (1980, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1996) were especially useful in understanding women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature. These models and approaches suggested that transformational change and growth occur in organic, deepening, nonlinear, spiral, or dialectic patterns over the course of the lifespan, in contrast to linear, stage-based models of development that assume all developmental tasks from one stage must be completed prior to vertical “advancement” in a stage hierarchy. Within spiral and dialectic models, embodiment is fundamental to psychospiritual development, while transformations may be sudden or gradual, and specific or expansive, without disrupting the process of growth.

Academic and Social Relevance

The findings and discussion generated by this exploration of women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature contributed to interdisciplinary research addressing, and thus expanding our academic understanding of, distance running in nature, spiritual practice, qualities of transformative experience, transformational processes, embodiment, and women’s psychospiritual development. Academics, clinicians, and spiritual directors interested in women’s embodiment and psychospiritual development may find this study relevant for their research, writing, and work with women. Clinicians who work with women may benefit from

insight into how a regular practice of distance running in nature promotes women's psychological healing and spiritual development, contributing to their full human development. Spiritual directors may gain a richer understanding of how distance running in nature as a spiritual practice facilitates women's deepening embodiment and psychospiritual development. Women may benefit significantly from the clinical and practical applications that clinicians and spiritual directors, and those in related professions, may be able to derive from this study.

A feminist paradigm informed, and was thus informed by, the qualitative data and discussion this study generated. Within a feminist paradigm, women's narratives and meaning making about our experiences, bodies, and psychological and spiritual lives serve as an "authoritative source" for spiritual truth, and themes that arise from women's stories offer insight into our deepest embodied wisdoms (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991). "The self- or co-creation of new meanings leads to an *emotional experience* of expansion, wholeness, and growth, and it is marked by positive affect" (Tronick, 2009, p. 99). While my hope and expectation was that this study would contribute to the wider body of knowledge about embodiment and spiritual development emerging in transpersonal research, my teleological concern remains that all girls and women flourish, transforming and transcending any internal and external barriers to our full embodiment and psychospiritual development in that process. I assumed that women's full embodiment, and psychological and spiritual flourishing, has direct sociocultural and political implications, and hoped this research would provide insight into how women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature might contribute to their personal and social empowerment.

Personal and Spiritual Relevance

My personal and spiritual interest in this topic began 7 years ago with my own transformative experiences while distance running in nature. When I began running, I was desperately seeking a nonpharmaceutical way to cope with the overwhelming anxiety that permeated my body and mind most days. Although I was physically active through walking and hatha yoga, I began to feel the impulse to run to calm the palpable “jitters” that left me feeling fearful, unable to concentrate, and often surging with anger. Deeper still, I longed for emotional change, for my life to change in positive ways, to become someone different. Fosha (2009) uses the term *transformance* to describe “the overarching motivational force that strives toward maximal vitality, authenticity, adaptation, and coherence” (p. 175), thus leading to growth and the opportunity for transformation.

Running short distances a few times a week on local trails, I immediately felt an unfamiliar calm permeate my body and linger for hours later. Within a few weeks of starting to run regularly, I accepted an invitation from my father to train for, and run, my first marathon 6 months later. I did not consider myself an athlete or “a runner,” but felt compelled to explore this new challenge, and imagined that more running would result in increased tranquility. Within weeks of committing to the marathon training, my mother was hospitalized with a sudden, potentially fatal illness, and my brother announced his impending deployment to the war in Iraq. As the pain of these potential losses penetrated all aspects of my life, my already-strained primary personal relationship began to unravel, and my running schedule seemed the only aspect of my life I could control.

Over many winter months I ran regularly outdoors, for increasingly longer distances, in solitude, primarily on quiet forest trails and dirt roads. My hunger for nutritious foods increased,

and I began to eat frequent meals after years of denying my hunger and subsisting on caffeine and sugar. A deepening sense of awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of the strength and reliability of my female body began to emerge, shifting my perspective of my body from being an object of other's acceptance or rejection, or my own object deserving of rejection or punishment for feeling hunger, tiredness, pleasure, or pain to being a body with fleshly, creaturely needs, feelings, and desires (Abram, 1996; Friedman & Moon, 1997).

During some runs, I became paralyzed with painful emotion, and would stop on the roadside for my body to release sobbing spasms of grief for past losses, memories and sensations of past traumas, and waves of current fear or sadness before being able to move forward. As I both experienced, and observed, the events of my life, and my responses to them, I was surprised that, after nearly a decade of depression, I was not slipping into that familiar state of despair, followed by numbness, and an inability to function in daily life. Instead, I was feeling deeply the rich layers of potent emotion evoked by loss and uncertainty. In the midst of inner darkness, the world and I were alive and colorful. I felt newly, and uncharacteristically, present.

On one especially long winter run, I was overcome by a deep, embodied knowing of something I could only name "faith," despite my intellectual assumption that faith was something accessible only to, and experienced only by, the devoutly religious, or at least those committed to a particular religious tradition with a definitive theological formulation of this concept "faith." Despite years of childhood formation in the Catholic tradition, formal Christian theological study in college and seminary, and work and leadership in Unitarian Universalist communities, I was having my first direct experience of faith and it did not fit my preconceived definitions. In the weeks following that run, I felt changed on a cellular level, and began to sense and embrace within my body the mystery of paradox, as my moral perspectives shifted. In one

especially poignant running moment, I felt the suffering of my own mother sending her soldier son off to war, and the suffering of an Iraqi mother losing her son because of that soldier. Both mothers became one within me, held in compassion, as dualistic concepts of right and wrong dissolved. These are but two examples of the expanding perspective and sense of embodiment I was acquiring.

Although my motivation to run was first to cope with anxiety, followed by the desire to confront a physical challenge and accomplish a seemingly impossible athletic goal, and, finally, to control what I could in my seemingly uncontrollable life, over many months of running a profound process of transformation began to unfold within me. Past traumas, religious conflict related to being a lesbian woman, and a decade-long struggle with depression began to shake loose and melt the frozen layers within my body, as running became meditation and more. I dreamt one night of going into the forest to create a blue circle on the ground, a symbol of wholeness, and intuitively sensed I should heed this call. By the time I completed my first marathon, I had consciously embraced running as a life-reviving practice, more aware than of how distance running in nature was changing me in the process of fulfilling my commitment to it each day.

In the years following the marathon, I continued to run in nature and my experience of it and commitment to it, as an intentional spiritual practice deepened. Through distance running in nature, emotion regulation, which Siegel (1999) refers to as “the general ability of the mind to alter the various components of emotional processing” (p. 245), creative insight, introspection, prayerfulness, meditation, and even moments of contemplation, were possible. My active participation in a process of inner transformation also resulted in many significant external changes in my relationships and professional path. As I began to experience genuine love for the

many aspects of my whole self, I found the courage to end an intimate relationship dependent upon suppression of, and disregard for, my feelings and needs, freeing me to subsequently choose the first mutually safe and loving relationship of my adulthood. I also veered off a trajectory toward ordained ministry, establishing a local nonprofit affiliated with *Girls on the Run International*, through which I witness the transformational impact of running on the lives of adolescent girls and women each day.

In more recent years, distance running in nature continued to provide a means of emotional regulation, to teach me to care for and nourish my body, soul, and psyche before all else, to challenge me to choose ways of being both feminine and masculine in relationships and in the world that are authentic and self-honoring, to open to shifting religious and spiritual identities while seeing their transience, and to enter into deeper mutual relationship with the natural world of which I am but a small part. During the course of this study, distance running in nature invited me to embrace the gift of a “natural faith,” a way of being in the world that I will continue to explore and explicate beyond this study.

Yet, throughout this continued growth, I have also experienced a repeated cycling back to old emotions, memories, habits, and patterns followed by a return to renewed ways of being, as my own sense of embodiment deepens and spirituality evolves in a kind of recursive, cycling spiral (Anderson, 2008; Ruumet, 1997, 2006; Washburn, 1995, 2003). I have used Metzner’s (1980) metaphor of transformation, from “fragmentation to wholeness” (p. 54), and Cohen’s (2000) metaphor of moving from alienation to connection, to describe this process.

Cycle 1: Clarifying the Research Topic

The vulnerable observer merely seeks to bridge the gap between subject and object. The wounded researcher, on the other hand, is meant to go down into the terrain beneath the bridge, into that abyss that the vulnerable observer attempts to bridge. The difference is that while the vulnerable observer includes only those subjective factors that he or she is

conscious of, the wounded researcher delves into his or her unconscious complexes, which he or she then strives to make conscious. (Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 108)

In the first cycle of an intuitive inquiry, the researcher clarifies a research topic that reflects her particular passions and interests, usually originating in her lived experience, during a creative process of imaginal dialogue with the proposed topic (Anderson, 2011a). She chooses, or is chosen by, a text that seems to speak to the topic, and through sustained dialogue allows the text to illuminate the focus and initial direction of the study. Only once the topic is so clarified does she then begin the process of the traditional researcher, reviewing current scholarly literature to determine what research has been done on the proposed topic.

It was my experience while distance running in nature that compelled me to enroll in a doctoral program in transpersonal psychology in the first place. There was something within the experience that I needed to work with, make sense of, and, yet, for the first 3 years as a doctoral student, I resisted the claim that this topic had made upon me. My conscious reasons for this resistance were many, and laced with tinges of fear and guilt that I would be traversing the boundaries of my prior theological education without a clear direction. While I flirted with my experience in course papers, the dream world began to captivate and disturb me, and so I allowed my attention to settle there in practice and in study as the dream and waking worlds intermingled. Finally, at the start of year 4, my resistance to the tension generated by this inward force pushing outward became futile. A crack appeared in my well-constructed armor and began to seep involuntarily. I cried as I attempted to share my then proposed dissertation topic with my colleagues, a cry that finally betrayed the voice of a frightened, long lost girl seeking to be heard. The beginnings of a proposal for this dissertation began to emerge as the crack widened and I both claimed the topic and allowed it to claim me. In the beginning, I focused solely on the

transformative and spiritual qualities running had taken on over the years, denying that for over a year I had been unable to walk or run without physical pain that could not be attributed to injury.

As I busily outlined a proposal and formed a dissertation committee, I curiously pondered my increasing academic preoccupation with the developmental themes in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 2004) and the contemporary retelling, *Alice in Wonderland* (Sutherland 2010), as well as the myths of the Greek virgin goddesses Artemis and Atalanta. Then a violent incident in my community tore open the increasingly unbearable tension within me. A flood of memories, emotions, and familiar physical and psychological symptoms that I believed were “overcome” through years of psychotherapy released in a fury. Within my running practice, within my proposed research, within my daily life, there lay open a now unavoidable, unhealed wound.

When I was an adolescent girl of 11, my aunt was raped and murdered while running alone on a rural road in Florida. Following her funeral in Wisconsin, I travelled with surviving relatives to her home in Florida. For 2 weeks I was a witness to a murder investigation, and visited the site where my aunt's desecrated body was found just a few short miles from her home. For decades, I had lived with the embodied memories of this multilayered trauma embedded within an earlier history of trauma and could no longer reconcile them with my, paradoxically, transformative experiences while distance running in nature. The conscious decision to study the most powerful, healing, freeing, and ultimately transformative, experiences of my life, and, I imagined, other women's lives, had spiraled me back to the overwhelming fear and horror of this childhood experience.

I returned to therapy in late spring and began, with relief, to finally recognize the patterns of complex posttraumatic stress (Courtis & Ford, 2009; Herman, 1992, 1997; Levine, 1997,

2010; Rothschild, 2000; Scaer, 2007; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996) within my body and mind, within my whole being, and marvel at the ways in which I had functioned ably in life since adolescence. As I began to run longer distances more frequently in the mountains of Northern Arizona where I live, the physical and emotional pain that had so gripped me in recent years began to slowly dissipate. As my body grew once again stronger, I became able to contain more fully the tension between my childhood fear of being fatally vulnerable while running alone with my adult experience of distance running in nature, usually alone, as deeply transformative and central to my adult development, psychologically and spiritually. As I became attuned to subtle shifts in my embodied response to other people, I became more fully aware that my own traumatized body held within it greater potential for intuitive sensing and insight than previously experienced or trusted. The once seemingly chaotic, completely permeable membrane of my embodied being had rapidly begun to transform into a more balanced cell with a heartier permeable membrane, instinctually wise to drawing in what is nourishing and life-giving, and eliminating what may become life-depriving or denying, or even death-inducing. As a researcher intending to engage my own body in the research process, I recognized this as an essential important time to wait and listen.

At the start of year 5, I finalized the study proposal and received approval from the required committees to begin research. In the meantime, I had turned back to the myths of Artemis and Atalanta for a Cycle 1 text, myths I knew would evoke imagination about, and insight into, my proposed topic. During the summer months I had become more familiar with the extant literature and research related to my topic, as the process of being claimed by my topic had cycled me back into the unhealed wounds of adolescence, and propelled me forward toward completion of my proposal. During that time, I often ran through the woods near my home, on no

path, with no destination, as the story of Atalanta would enter into my mind unbidden. I would imagine being embodied as this archetypal figure as I ran, and could feel within her experience.

In an informal assignment for Rosemarie Anderson's research group on myth and human development, the prior spring, I had written the following.

Atalanta is identified in myth as the Greek goddess of running and as a virgin goddess of the hunt (Walker, 1983). When Atalanta is born her father abandons her, exposed, on a mountain because she is not a boy. A she-bear, incarnation of Artemis, virgin goddess of wilderness and animals, fertility, and childbirth, is said to find and raise her. Later, Atalanta, who can run faster than any man, participates in the hunt for the Calydonian Boar sent by Artemis to Calydon and is the first to draw blood. Meleagros kills the boar and offers the hide to the virgin Atalanta who participates in killing two men who try to rape her and steal the hide. She later reunites with her father who wants to hold a footrace to determine who will marry her. Atalanta agrees to the race on the condition that she run and wed the winner. The losers will be put to death. Hippomenes calls upon the goddess Aphrodite who gives him golden fruit to throw before Atalanta in the footrace. When she stoops to pick them up, he beats her. Angry Aphrodite turns Atalanta and her new husband into lions shortly after they marry.

The inner experience or introspective capacity of characters is rarely revealed in action-oriented Greek myths, and that is the case with Atalanta. However, her ability to participate competently in the boar hunt and later footrace, and kill those threatening her with physical harm situate her on Axis 5, the competence body on Anderson's (2008) body map. She clearly embodies "mastery, skill, and competence" (p. 8) as both hunter and runner, and uses her keen intellect to strategize a way to maintain her independent status. Given Atalanta's resistance to conventional social norms for her as female, she appears to have passed the Conformist Stage in Cook-Greuter's model (2005) and may reflect the Expert or Technician stage. Although she reconnects with her father, she sets the conditions for participating in his plan for her marriage. She seems to anticipate she will win the race and not have to marry and succumb to this threat to her strong sense of self. The marriage does appear to lead to a loss of self when Hippomenes' tiff with Aphrodite gets Atalanta turned into a lion. (Ludwig, 2010, p. 1)

At the time this was written, I suspected it was central to my dissertation research, but when the course was completed I simply let it rest and was curiously surprised when it began to weave its way into my summer running. I returned to the myth in Cycle 1 reflection, and began to receive intimations of its deeper significance for my own developmental story and my research topic, first in the form of questions and then in a quieter inner shift. I was intrigued by

the early rescue of the abandoned Atalanta by the Goddess Artemis. From the natural, mountaintop site of her potential death, salvation came in the form of a fierce and powerful animal and manifestation of the divine feminine. When Atalanta came of age, she would only marry someone faster than her and yet, does she, like many human women, especially those wounded early in life, “drop the ball” of realizing her own psychospiritual potential, consciously or unconsciously, in hopes of gaining love? I recalled that as a child I read and enjoyed a much tamer version of this myth in which there was no rape attempt, while reading as an adult the story nearly burst with the tension of my own lived experiences of violent loss and distance running in nature. How does a girl or woman confronted with such a threat to her life and selfhood, as in Atalanta’s case, continue to develop spiritually, as a fully embodied person? And what might be made of Atalanta turned into a lion? Could this transformation from human to animal actually liberate her from the socially imposed limitations of her femaleness, allowing her to discover her own instinctual power? As I moved into and out of the myth while running and reflecting, the archetypal qualities of Atlanta and Artemis began to take hold more fully, as the embodied memories of my own past begin to soften their grip, offering a vision, and the sensations, of release.

In the next chapter of this study, I situate distance running in nature within a transpersonal context and then review a range of empirical research and theoretical literature from transpersonal psychology and related disciplines that provided insight into the four dominant themes of this study through a gendered “lens”: running, transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development. In Chapter 3, I introduce and discuss intuitive inquiry as the research method, and embodied writing as the primary data collection tool, used in this study. I also outline the research design used to explore 23 women’s transformative

experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. In Chapter 4, I present the study findings in five sections through verbatim excerpts from the women's writings and thematic content analysis. In Chapter 5, I discuss the significant findings of this study and their implications for understanding women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature and the embodied spirituality recognizable among women for whom this is an ongoing spiritual practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In recent decades, the West has witnessed increased interest in running as a popular form of exercise and a topic of physiological and psychological research. With the Title IX education amendment of 1972, women in the United States gained more equal access to school-based athletics and became increasingly visible participants in recreational and competitive American running and as research subjects. However, the history of women's running confirms it is not solely a contemporary exercise and personal development phenomenon.

Running among Western women has roots in ancient Greece where running and fertility were culturally connected as evidenced by a statue of the fertility goddess Demeter at the entrance of the Olympia stadium. Spartan women competed in state-sponsored races intended to perfect them as mothers and citizens, and girls in Delphi participated in the Heraea, a race honoring the goddess Hera (Mills, 1994). Mythic stories of the Greek goddesses Atalanta and Artemis reveal they were honored for being swift runners.

Many North American indigenous peoples have ancient running traditions that served their communication, warfare, and hunting needs prior to modernity, and still serve "to enact their myths and to create a bridge between themselves and the forces of the universe" (Nabokov, 1987, p. 9). In contemporary Navajo culture, adolescent girls participate in Kinaalda, a multiple-day coming-of-age ceremony that includes a sacred morning run (Frisbee, 1993; Ryan, 1988; Toledo-Benalli, 2003).

In both ancient Greece and modern Navajo culture, running served spiritual purposes while promoting physical health and stamina. Higdon (1993) similarly suggested that Western runners often experience a form of spiritual awakening as a result of running, leave their old

nonrunning world behind to become proselytizers for their new “faith,” and create a system of running conduct ritually comparable to traditional religious behavior. An increasing body of anecdotal and popular literature exploring personal running experiences or running and spirituality (Battista, 2004; Joslin, 2003; Kay, 2007; Lynch & Scott, 1999; McDougall, 2009), including literature that focuses on women’s experiences (Lin, 2006; Reti, 2001; Sosienski, 2006), confirm the relationship between running and spirituality are of increasing personal, cultural, and research interest.

This section of the Literature Review discusses empirical research and theoretical literature in psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, and related disciplines that I reviewed prior to the start of this study. This literature provided insight into four dominant themes in this study, from a female embodied perspective: running, transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development. Each section of this review focuses on literature from a theme area that I identified as having particular relevance for this study exploring women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. The first section highlights current neuroscience research on the physiological effects of running on neural plasticity, a study that compared the hormonal effects of running and sitting meditation, and a body of psychological research that addressed the clinical effects of therapeutic running on women, and the ways in which distance running promotes psychological change and growth among women. The second section includes philosophical considerations of the nature of transformation and current research on transformative states of consciousness and processes as related to women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature. The third section highlights philosophical considerations of mind-body dualism in Western culture, the impact

of this dualism on female embodiment, and theories that explored embodiment in human development. The final section considers theories of psychospiritual development that provided a context for understanding where women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature and embodied spirituality intersect.

Running

The physiological effects of running on neural plasticity. In this decade, neuroscientists became very interested in how physical activity affects the structures and function of the brain, given the brain's apparent lifelong capacity for plasticity. This capacity, or "fundamental brain property," is referred to as "neuroplasticity" and describes "changeable, malleable and modifiable" (Doidge, 2007, p. xv) response of brain nerve cells, or neurons, to experience and environment. Most empirical research measuring the impact of physical activity on brain plasticity has utilized laboratory mice engaged in forced and voluntary running on treadmills and wheels. It is not known how generalizable these findings are to understanding human brain plasticity, however.

Greenwood and Fleshner (2008) asserted that exercise in mice produces a stress-resistant brain by stimulating "adaptations in several neural circuits and brain regions that are both stress sensitive and involved in learned helplessness" (p. 92). Further, they speculated that exercise increases the brain's capacity for plasticity, especially in the areas of the brain that generate behavioral responses to environmental demands. Fabel and Kempermann (2008), like Greenwood and Fleshner (2008), likewise proposed that running signals to the brain that neural development is needed to respond to environmental "situations rich in complexity and novelty that presumably benefit from more new neurons" (p. 59). These findings are consistent with a more recent study that demonstrated the effect of physical activity on cognitive performance and

memory (Pontifex, Hillman, Fernhall, Thompson, & Valentini, 2009). Van Praag (2008) noted that most studies of neurogenesis demonstrate the beneficial effects of physical exercise on improved learning and memory, and attribute those effects to changes in the “function of neurotransmitter systems in the brain” (p. 133) specifically the expression of hippocampal proteins in genes related to plasticity. In short, most neuroscience research confirms that when mice voluntarily exercise on a wheel the result is increased neurogenesis in the hippocampus. An exception is when mice are subject to the stressor of social isolation, which may delay or reverse the positive effects of running on the brain (Stranahan, Khalil, & Gould, 2006).

A study by Liu et al. (2009) found that forced treadmill running produced observable effects in the amygdala of mice in addition to the hippocampus, whereas voluntary wheel running affected only the hippocampus in their mice. Their study demonstrated for the first time that “in mice, only moderate treadmill exercise improves aversive memory, although both treadmill and wheel running exercise can improve spatial learning and memory” (p. 3229). In the researchers’ view, “repeated mild stresses, such as those encountered, in our treadmill exercise protocol, may be necessary to alter the amygdala in a favorable way for aversive learning and memory” (p. 3229). This suggests that running may also directly alter the amygdala, site of our fear memories often resulting from psychologically traumatic experiences (LeDoux, 1998, 2003; Nader, Schafe, & Le Doux, 2000).

Research comparing the physiological and psychological effects of running and sitting meditation suggested they shared similar benefits. Techniques of slow, distance running and transcendental meditation can be combined to stimulate an altered state of consciousness that enhances the outcomes of formal individual and group therapy (Solomon & Bumpus, 1978). Studies comparing hormone production in control groups of elite runners following running and

highly trained yogic meditators following meditation demonstrated that running, like meditation, increased levels of corticotropin-releasing hormone and cortisol, in addition to beta-endorphin, which all correlate with positive mood changes (Harte, 1992; Harte, Eifert, & Smith, 1995). While these studies established that running and sitting meditation result in comparable positive mood changes, despite metabolic differences in the two activities, the control groups were limited to males with mean ages of 31.3 years (runners) and 31.6 (meditators) who the researchers identified as advanced in their training. Thus, it is not known what effects running might have on female runners of differing ages and training levels.

These studies, and further research, addressing the physiological effects of running on neural plasticity confirmed that running impacts the body in observable ways. What these studies did not address is how these physiological changes within the body are experienced psychologically and spirituality, or interpreted by human beings, and, specifically, by women. By exploring women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature through their embodied narratives, this study provided connections between physiological changes within the body, transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development.

The psychological effects of running on women. Running has been a topic of research interest and used as a therapeutic intervention since the 1970s (Kostrubala, 1976, 1978, 1984; Sachs & Buffone, 1984), yet few studies have included women as primary participants or carefully considered the impact of running on women's lives. However, such studies have increased and begun to provide rich psychological insight into the effects of running and distance running on women. Women's personal narratives about running, including transformative experiences, in popular books and journals (Barker, 2004; Lin, 2006; Ryan, 1988; Sosienski, 2006) have also become more commercially available. Yet, no formal research study to date has

explored the topic of this study, women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development.

Three quantitative studies from the 1980s addressed women and running by focusing on the therapeutic or clinical benefits of using running as a form of aerobic exercise. They demonstrated that clinically depressed women experienced a significant reduction in depressive symptoms while participating in a short-term running program and significant improvements in self-concept when they continued to run from 1-12 months upon completion of the program (Doyne, Chambless, & Beutler, 1983; Doyne et al., 1987; Ossip-Klein et al., 1989). These studies demonstrated that running is an effective clinical intervention for depressed women, but did not situate the treatment of psychopathology within a wider transpersonal context of transformation or spiritual development. We do not know if women for whom running is an effective therapeutic intervention might also experience a transformation of consciousness or spiritual growth through continued voluntary distance running in nature. We also do not know how many of the benefits demonstrated by these studies are due to running or attuned association with the clinician or other people in the programs.

Grant (1987) conducted a quasiexperimental study in which 623 women participating in a 10K run in Boston were tested for self-esteem and attributional style and compared with control groups of women identified as athletic but not runners, and as nonathletic. The results showed that the group of running women demonstrated significantly higher self-esteem and happiness than the other two groups. However, this study was limited to participants in a road race, did not provide the participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences, and did not consider possible transpersonal dimensions of their running.

Leedy (2009) used case method analysis to study the narratives of five “white middle- to upper-middle-class women who live in small towns in a north central state and had completed races of at least 13.1 miles (half marathon)” (p. 90). They reported that during periods of emotional stress distance running had helped them cope. The participants attributed increases in self-efficacy and self-worth with their use of running to cope with stressful life circumstances, including arrest for drunk driving, alcohol use, adoption of a child, death of family members, and marital problems. Their narratives revealed that running also served as a self-administered therapeutic activity for managing their moods and energy levels. The study considered the psychological and physiological results of women choosing to use running to cope while their lives were functioning well enough, rather than focusing on how clinicians might use running to treat women for depression or anxiety. It also expanded our understanding of women’s experiences of running by starting with the participants’ personal narratives. Both Grant (1987) and Leedy (2009) identified psychological benefits of running for women; however, neither of them specifically explored distance running in nature or the spiritual benefits.

Majcen (2007) studied the psychosocial effects of participation in a marathon-training program, and completion of an urban marathon (26.2 miles), among 27 women between the ages of 40 and 64 in the Washington DC area. Using an interview series and grounded theory, she classified both “perceived effects during marathon training” and “perceived effects resulting from marathon completion across the domains of physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and daily life changes” (p. iv). When asked about the spiritual effects of their training, a portion of the participants associated spirituality with their experience, and Majcen categorized their responses as “connecting with a higher being” (p. 65), “connecting with inner self” (p. 66), “connecting with others” (p. 68), and “appreciation/connecting with nature” (p. 69). Upon

completion of the training and marathon, several participants experienced notable changes within themselves that Majcen categorized as “transformation through the process” (p. 87). The key finding of the study is that marathon training and completion provides women in middle age with an opportunity for empowerment and transformation through the achievement of a challenging goal with group support. This study began to consider the women’s distance running beyond the psychological through limited identification of four spiritual effects on selected women who trained for and ran an urban marathon. However, participation was limited to women over 40 registered for an urban marathon-training program and race, so we do not know how the findings are applicable to adult women under 40, to women who do not choose to participate in a group marathon training, or who live and run in rural areas. None of the women were identified as having engaged in a long-term practice of distance running in nature, nor considered it a central part of their spiritual lives. Data was collected solely through interviews and analyzed using grounded theory, so we do not have insight into women’s transformative experiences, as written by them, from the perspective of the body, nor through the transformative process of the researcher.

Boudreau (2009) conducted a hermeneutical phenomenological study on the benefits of distance trail running among seven experienced women runners who were also employees. The research found that distance trail running positively impacted their productivity in the workplace and “increased job stress relief,” through “increased self-efficacy at work, more positive attitude, enhanced performance, better time management and organization skills, greater discipline and mental focus with career goals, and increased problem-solving” (p. iii), among other changes. A secondary finding of the study was that trail running contributed to the women feeling connected to nature through the meditative quality of their running and the experience of being “in the

moment” (p. 120). While this study provided insight into the workplace benefits of trail running, or running outdoors in nature, and to secondary meditative benefits, the study did not intentionally focus on distance running in nature as a spiritual practice, transformative experiences, embodiment, or psychospiritual development. The seven participants in that study had completed a road marathon and trail race but did not identify their running as a spiritual practice. Data was gathered through semistructured interviews and analyzed using a research method that invites the researcher to gain understanding of what a participant’s experience is like. However, women did not have the opportunity to write about their experiences, or consider them from the perspective of the body. Of the seven women included in the study, four shared all of the effects identified.

A phenomenological study by Boudreau and Giorgi (2010) described the “extraordinary mental change and self-discovery” (p. 234) experienced by two female athletes who ran marathons at the novice level. The six constituents identified by the researchers through participant interviews were

Participants’ Perception of an Enhancing Outdoor Environment, Life-Style Changes Resulting in More Openness to Others and Self, Life-Style Changes Resulting in More Openness to Others and Self, Discoveries Concerning Self-Improvements, Sustaining a Desired Mental Disposition, Empowerment in Considering New Possibilities, and Supporting for Encountering Future Challenges. (p. 234)

The authors described the progressive relationship between constituents as follows:

The start of the women’s lived experience began while they were long-distance trail running in what they perceived as an enjoyable outdoor setting (constituent 1). The tranquil, spiritual and physically challenging wilderness experience gave the women private time to reflect, which prompted more openness to others and themselves, thus resulting in life changes at home and work (constituent 2). The women discovered self-improvements that occurred from marathon running (see constituent 3), and they were sustaining a desired mental disposition (constituent 4). The women had empowerment in considering new possibilities for personal or career goals (constituent 5), and felt support for encountering future unknown challenges (constituent 6). (p. 251)

The women experienced both emotional and mental changes in the process of being “inadvertently swept away with their body-spirit-mind awakening in connection with marathon running” (Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010, p. 256), and the result was increased self-efficacy and self-awareness. This swept away state was described in meditative terms, as quiet, peaceful, inward, relaxed, unaware of the environment, but as more than meditative, as “it encompasses her entire core, in a very whole and ‘spiritual’ manner” (p. 258). Eventually the driver (the woman running) of the car (body) returned to the car, “a woman awakens from her peaceful and spiritual state, her mind, body and spirit have been rejuvenated” (p. 259), the environment reappeared, and she experienced positive physical and mental changes. Those changes included valuing time for herself, greater balance in her life, less emotional pain, and a sense of inward connection, and renewed relationships. The authors used the image of a butterfly emerging from its cocoon to describe the transformation, and the metaphor of “the journey from birth to death” (p. 260) to convey the ways in which running symbolized the process of life. They concluded the described phenomena are possible and suggested that future research could verify the commonality of these and other changes. An obvious limitation of this study, also noted by the authors, is that the phenomena described are based upon interviews with only two women who, again, have completed road marathons, and so may not fully reflect the experiences, including those identified as transformative, of women who practice distance running in nature and may have never completed a road race or marathon. We also do not gain in-depth insight into the dynamics of transformative experiences, embodiment, or psychospiritual development.

Boudreau’s research was the first to begin considering the spiritual impact of distance running, and of running outdoors on trails, on women’s lives. In the process of conducting her dissertation research, Boudreau (2009) learned secondarily that trail running has a spiritual

quality about it for some women. In her next study, she offered a rich description of how distance running outdoors might facilitate women's psychological growth through self-discovery and significant mental changes, which are recognizable aspects of women's psychospiritual development. She also described a shifting connection between mind, body, and spirit in the distance running phenomena experienced by the two women included in the study. Like the Majcen (2007) study, it was not evident that the women in Boudreau's studies identified their distance running, with intentionality, as a spiritual practice or central to their spiritual lives. While being outdoors was described as enhancing their experience of running, and contributing to the psychological changes observed, the primacy of nature to their running was also not apparent.

In the study reported here, I expounded transpersonally upon this existing psychological research. I explored 23 women's transformative experiences while engaging in a spiritual practice of distance running in nature, and the processes of embodiment and psychospiritual development that might be catalyzed by such experiences.

Transformation

Hart (2000) writes

To transform is to go beyond current form. Transformation manifests as both an outcome and a process; it is the push and the pulse that drives self-organization and self-transcendence, a movement pushing simultaneously toward increasing unity and toward diversity. In human development, 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. (p. 157)

The varieties of transformative experience are abundant (Metzner, 2010). Each of the world's ancient wisdom traditions explicated practices for use in the quest for transformative experience, and theological terms to describe and make meaning of those processes (Mijares, 2003). A study of self-transformation among the traditions revealed that, regardless of place and

time, the fruits of the transformative journey can be recognized through 10 common, yet mysterious, “metaphors for the transformation of human consciousness” (Metzner, 1980, p. 49). These metaphors point toward transformations of thought, emotions, heart, perception, and function through a change process that may be fundamental to human experience, but elusive to description. They may also be useful in conveying transformative experiences that arise outside of the context of traditional religious belief and practice.

For a contemporary exploration of women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development, two bodies of transformation research that honor the mysterious and metaphorical nature of transformation were most relevant. The first body of literature addressed the transformation of emotions, and the second, the transformation of consciousness. Both bodies of literature left significant room for the further development of insight into women’s transformative experiences and processes outside of traditional religious practice through this study.

Emotional transformation through accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy.

Through ongoing clinical research using accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy (AEDP), Fosha (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) and her colleagues developed a phenomenology of an emotion-based transformation process that revealed itself within that clinical context. “We discovered that not only does the processing of emotions release the adaptational resources contained within them, but also that the exploration of the *experience* of transformation activates a nonlinear, nonfinite *transformational spiral*” (2009a, p. 173). Fosha (2009a) described the spiral as having four states: “Stress, Distress, and Symptoms,” “The Processing of Core Affective Experience,” “The Metaprocessing of Transformational Experience,” and “Core State” (p. 184). The states are bridged by three state transformations

during which safety in the dyadic therapeutic relationship is first cocreated, resilience then emerges, and finally a positive valuation of the self emerges through successful secure attachment. Each transformational state is accompanied by specific emotions, beginning with the state characterized as defensive (e.g., shame, fear, anxiety), and arriving at those positive affects I would call transpersonal including calm or flow, clarity, connection, exuberance, hope, bliss, and others (Fosha, 2008).

The effectiveness of AEDP is based upon the presupposition that “people have a fundamental need for transformation. We are wired for growth, healing, and self-righting, that is, resuming impeded growth” (Fosha, 2008, p. 290). This need is met through overcoming internal resistance to activate *transformance*, “the overarching motivational force, operating in both development and therapy that strives toward maximally adaptive organization, vitality, authenticity, and connection” (2008, p. 292) and “thus leads to growth and transformation” (Fosha, 2009a, p. 175). It is a force “driven by hope and the search for the vitalizing positive experience” (2009a, p. 175). Additionally, “crisis and intense emotional suffering, *when experienced in conditions of safety*, can be a great boon to transformative strivings. The alchemy of transformative strivings together with the drive to relieve distress is an unbeatable mix for change” (Fosha, 2009a, p. 176).

The value of AEDP research for this study was that it offered a transformational process model that provided insight into profound emotional changes which occurred during women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature. The neuroscience research on running presented earlier suggested structural changes to the amygdala and hippocampal regions of the brain might occur as a result of regular running. The AEDP research explicated the profound emotional changes occurring simultaneously, while also suggesting that further

reflection on those emotionally transformative experiences may result in additional brain changes to “the corpus callosum, the prefrontal cortex, (especially the right prefrontal cortex shown to mediate emotionally loaded autobiographical narrative), the insula and the anterior cingulate” (Fosha, 2003, p. 275; Siegel, 1999, 2003). The affective results of each state, particularly those positive affects arising through the metaprocessing of transformational experience and arrival in core state, were also useful for contextualizing the powerful emotions and emotional changes described in women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature.

Two limitations of this research for this study was that AEDP is a therapeutic process that “recruits the transformational power of dyadic relational processes” (Fosha, 2009b, p. 255), and is contained by the therapeutic relationship. There were limitations in applying the model to processes that arise through seemingly individual experiences like running, including running with friends and partners who were not trained to provide clinical therapeutic support, rather than within the context of a formal therapeutic relationship and process. The ongoing clinical research also included men and women, with no differentiation of gender made in the model, suggesting the transformational process described was equally applicable to men and women. However, the results of this study provided insight into how clinicians might integrate distance running in nature into the therapeutic process.

Transformation of consciousness through traditional spiritual practice. A second body of research on transformation valuable for this study was conducted as the Transformation Project through the Institute of Noetic Sciences. The research team (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Vieten, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006) conducted interviews with 47 teachers and scholars of religious and spiritual traditions to learn how transformations of consciousness arise and how

they are integrated into an individual's life as sustained change. They learned that through transformative spiritual practice, defined as “any set of internal or external activities you engage in with the intention of fostering long-lasting shifts in the way you experience and relate to yourself and others” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007, p. 93), humans “create the ideal conditions for natural transformation to flourish” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007, p. 67). Such practices result in transformative experience, or “experience that results in a lasting change of worldview, as opposed to an extreme, extraordinary, peak, or spiritual experience that doesn't necessarily translate into long-term changes in your way of being” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007, p. 20). These changes result in “profound internal shifts that result in long-lasting changes in the way you experience and relate to yourself, others, and the world” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007, p. 15) and “a dramatic restructuring of core values” that “appears to be universal” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007, p. 25). Changes in core values include the development of compassion and altruism, among other qualities (Vietan, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006). Like Fosha (2009), this research suggested that suffering also invites transformation.

In fact, some transformations seem to *require* the kind of vulnerability that accompanies extreme loss or grief. This is what separates transformation from more linear processes of psychological development as typically understood. Transformation often asks for something to die so that something new can be born. (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007, p. 30)

The Transformation Project at the Institute of Noetic Sciences focused on the process of transforming consciousness through transformative spiritual practice, and by their definition, distance running in nature functions as a form of spiritual practice under the right conditions. The research also proved helpful in this study for understanding, generally, how changed states of consciousness (James, 1902/2009; Tart, 2000) arose and were integrated into a woman's life. Tronick (2009) writes, “A state of consciousness is a dynamically changing biopsychological

state integrating biological and psychological meaning, purposiveness, and intentions made at every level and site of operation in the organism, from physiology to awareness” (p. 94). This expansive definition of a state of consciousness further substantiated the transformative potential of distance running in nature as spiritual practice. What remained unknown from the IONS Transformation research that this study provided insight into, is how gendered differences impact the transformation of consciousness, and if there were particular barriers and/or catalysts/facilitators women experienced in transformations of consciousness.

In light of these two bodies of research, it was clear that the primary value, for this study, of Hart’s (2000) juxtaposition of process and paradox as inherent within transformation, and Metzner’s use of classical metaphors to describe transformational processes and experiences (1980, 2010), was to provide a qualitative description of, and possible metaphors for, the mysterious experience and process of transformation. However, I was cautious about uncritically applying these metaphors directly to women’s transformative experiences of distance running in nature, as most traditional metaphors for transformation reinforce a problematic mind-body dualism by emphasizing the transformation of consciousness with little or no consideration of the body. Cohen (2000) offered the most embodied metaphor of transformation I had encountered in describing her personal journey from alienation to connection. To ensure, however, the most accurate representation of women’s transformative experiences of distance running in nature, new metaphors, terms, and definitions for the transformational process were identified in the course of this study.

Embodiment

In an essay exploring her embodied journey from alienation to connection, Cohen (2000), a Zen priest wrote, “while the feeling of alienation may be one’s greatest suffering, its opposite,

connection, a sense of union, or intimacy, may be one's greatest comfort and joy" (p. 35). "Reestablishing these primal, healing connections" (p. 35) with her body allowed Cohen to move from knowing her body only from the outside, "how it looked in a mirror" (p. 35), to being unable to separate her body from what she refers to as "I" (p. 35). She moved from participating in her own objectification as a body to defining her subjectivity as a living body. Becoming and living as a connected body served as the starting point for deepening connection with her yearnings and needs, her feelings, other people and relationships, the activity of daily life, and suffering, and, thus, became definitive of her spirituality. Cohen's description of moving from alienation to connection, first in body, and then beyond, serves as a powerful metaphor for what this study sought to explore of women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and spiritual development, but was not definitive of the experiences explored. Despite its power, this metaphor was derived solely from Cohen's personal journey, articulated in a first person narrative, and could not be universally applied to the embodied experiences or spiritual journeys of women in this study.

Ettling (1994) described embodiment as "the felt experience of being in one's own body or more deeply connected to one's body in a way that promotes awareness of feelings and intuitions and results in a greater sense of wholeness and integration" (p. 8). Schlitz, Vieten, and Amorok (2007) provided further explication: "Embodiment involves giving concrete form to an abstract concept (e.g., love or unity or belonging). When you embody something, you take what you've learned—the insights you've gained through your direct experience—and you give it form" (p. 155). For women, embodiment is often experienced as deeply relational, not something that can be fully known or experienced outside of relationship to others and the world, and nearly impossible to consider apart from sexuality and spirituality. However, living in a culture shaped

by Cartesian mind-body dualism, and the devaluation of the feminine and female body, often requires that women undergo a process of transformation, a healing and transcending of trauma to that relational self, to live as fully embodied beings with the capacity to develop spiritually. Given this reality, literature explicating Cartesian mind-body dualism in Western culture, the impact of this dualism including trauma and attachment disturbances on female embodiment, and theories that consider embodiment in human development were valuable for understanding women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature.

The philosophical problem of mind-body dualism in Western culture. Scholars have soundly established that women born into and living in Western patriarchal cultures influenced by Cartesian mind-body dualism may encounter external and internal barriers to becoming fully embodied adults (Bordo, 2003; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Welton, 1999). Descartes' "well known separation of the thinking mind, or subject, from the material world of things, or objects" (as cited in Abram, 1996, pp. 31-32) including the human body and nature, was based upon a "fundamental division between two independent and separate realms—that of mind, the 'thinking thing' (*res cogitans*), and that of matter, the 'extended thing' (*res extensa*)" (as cited in Capra, 2002, p. 33). In the process of sorting mind from matter, Descartes divided all of reality "into conscious subjects and mere bodies (*res extensa*)" (as cited in Bordo, 2003, p. 73). He finally established that "the whole range of human passions and moods, as well as the determinations of the will, are nothing more than the effects of the mechanical interactions of the fluid and parts of the body" (as cited in Weldon, 1999, p. 3).

Lakoff and Johnson (1999), and Damasio (1999), drawing upon data from cognitive science, argued the a priori claims upon which Descartes' dualistic worldview was built were empirically unfounded. Descartes (as cited in Lakoff & Johnson) wrongly assumed that human

reason “is the capacity of the human mind to use transcendent reason” (p. 21), that “human concepts are the concepts of transcendent reason” (p. 21), and that “human concepts therefore characterize the objective categories of mind-, brain- and body-free reality” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 21). Neural structures clearly pattern our experiences and shape human reason so that “our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 6). As Abram (1996) wrote,

The human mind is not some otherworldly essence that comes to house itself inside our physiology. Rather, it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth. The invisible shapes of smells, rhythms of cricketsong, and the movement of shadows all, in a sense, provide the subtle body of our thoughts. Our own reflections, we might say, are a part of the play of light and *its* reflections. (p. 262)

Yet, however wrong Descartes’ argument was, the “psychic legacy” (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 2) of Descartes’ “mechanistic view of the body” (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7) continues to be seen and felt, often as shame (Pearce, 2002), in Western culture and sciences. Psychology has been modeled on “the positivism of the ‘hard’ sciences, a science wherein the psyche had itself been reified into an ‘object,’ a thing to be studied like any other thing in the determinate, objective world” (Abram, 1998, p. 35). Bordo (2003) observed that the central features of Cartesian dualism are markedly similar to the images and associations presented by anorectic women who experience deep conflict about their female bodies and sexuality: “the body is experienced as *alien*, as the not-self, the not-me” (p. 144), “as *confinement* and *limitation*” (p. 144), and as “the *enemy*” (p. 145). Adams (1993), Plumwood (1993), and Warren (1996) argued that women, the poor, children, animals, and nature have paid a hefty social and spiritual price for their confinement to a lower, material status. Sports and exercise are thought of as purely physical activities, whereas education and contemplation are the domains of the mind (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The valuing of the mental and spiritual over the seeming separate bodily or material also served as an experiential foundation for many of the world's religions that inform transpersonal thought (Ferrer, 2002). The transcendental-vertical-ascending "dominant zeitgeist" (p. 78) of transpersonal psychology is dualistic and most notably represented by religion's emphasis on hierarchical spiritual advancement and heightened consciousness through separation from the body, sexuality, and other senses and the mundane (Daniels, 2005). However, another "immanent-horizontal-descending position argues that transformation is to be sought through greater connection to the world of nature, to other people, the body, the feminine, or the dynamic ground of the unconscious" (Daniels, 2005, p. 27).

The impact of mind-body dualism on women's lives. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft wrote "the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilded cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (as cited in Bordo, 2003, p. 18). She recognized in the cognitive impairment of women in her time the inherent unity of mind and body that is empirically verifiable today. She also recognized that our particular environments and experiences shape our embodiment. Although social, political, and religious realities of Western women's lives have changed since the late 18th century, Western girls and women still undergo mind-body split enculturation in societies that persist in the philosophical and institutional objectification and commoditization of women's bodies, and the enactment of this split is gendered (Bordo, 1996). By embodying masculine qualities of "detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control" (Bordo, 1996, p. 209), women are empowered in the public sphere, yet the effects on the psychological and moral development of women and girls are often detrimental to their development of whole, authentic selves (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Gilligan, 1993; Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009; Miller, 1987; Pipher, 1994; Woodman, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1996).

Women writers have suggested that coming home to the fully inhabited female body is necessary for women to awaken spiritually in patriarchal culture (Borysenko, 1996, 1999; Harris, 1989; Kidd, 1996; Murdock, 1990; Perera, 1981; Ryan, 1998; Woodman, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1996). Kidd (1996) described how this process may be experienced and expressed.

Waking to the sacredness of the female body will cause a woman to “enter into” her body in a new way, be at home in it, honor it, nurture it, listen to it, delight in its sensual music. She will experience her female flesh as beautiful and holy, as a vessel of the sacred. She will live from her gut and feet and hands and instincts and not entirely in her head. Such a woman conveys a formidable presence because power resides *in* her body. The bodies of such women, instead of being groomed to some external standard, are penetrated with soul quickened from the inside. (pp. 161-162)

As women experience transformation from mind-body dualism to embodiment, the preoccupation with body image, being sexually attractive and desirable to observers (or not), and food, often gives way to desire for full sensual experience, for experiencing oneself as an embodied subject connected to self, others, and the world. In listening deeply to women’s experiences of the sacred, researchers have discovered that the body often serves as a doorway or vehicle to spiritual growth for women, whether through childbirth, illness, or sexuality (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Borysenko, 1996; Esbjörn, 2003). The permeable nature of women’s bodies “shapes how we perceive reality, how we act, how we create, and what we value” (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991, p. 183).

A study of 50 women who survived childhood violence (Ryan, 1998), a disturbingly common female experience, revealed that physical and sexual violations during childhood had initially negative effects on their spirituality, but that the effects were transformed over time. While the violence against them caused many to “have had negative feelings toward religion, God and/or spirituality” (p. 96) at points in their lives, “addressing painful wounds from

childhood violence involved the development of deep, personal spirituality. Through healing work, spirituality appeared, and through spiritual seeking, healing occurred” (p. 96). Between the periods of negative feelings and healing, “most of the women went through a stage of doing whatever they could to avoid feeling the pain, during which they often experienced very little spiritual connection” (p. 96). The disembodiment experienced through abuse resulted in spiritual disconnection and the process of becoming more fully embodied was integral in their healing and spiritual growth.

These findings were consistent with a growing body of research that substantiates childhood trauma and violence may negatively impact women’s embodiment (Cohen, 2000; Levine & Kline, 2007; Ryan, 1998; Scaer, 2005; Siegel, 1999; Siegel & Solomon, 2003). Similarly, early attachment disturbances may manifest in the body as “procedurally learned physical tendencies” (Ogden, 2009, p. 205) that may be healed through therapeutic and intimate relationships in which secure attachment is developed through mindfulness, movement, safe touch, and trust. This trauma and attachment research can be helpful for women and those who care for them in understanding how early experiences may impact development and the experience of embodiment. However, it may also contribute to reductionistic assumptions about women’s lives and bodies, including that traumatic experiences impact all women similarly, and that the complexity of women’s lives and personal narratives can be fully explained by brain function.

Writers on women’s spirituality have often claimed that a journey of descent is necessary for women to embrace their female embodiment, especially those who have experienced abuse or appropriated the values of a masculine-oriented society (Bordo, 1996; Woodman, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1992). For Perera (1981), the Sumarian poem of goddess Inanna’s descent into the

underworld served as a modern initiation myth for the woman who must descend into her own deepest, unconscious, feminine ground in order to claim her embodied feminine Self. In what Murdock (1990) calls the “heroine’s journey” (p. 3), the woman who has rejected the feminine, her “instinctual body wisdom” (p. 24), “loses the ability to recognize her body’s limitations, incurring pain and illness as the split grows between body and mind” (p. 24). Her spirituality is inhibited by this bodily denial. In order to recover what is lost, to make this journey of descent into the depths of reclaiming her split-off self, she “puts aside her fascination with the intellect and games of the cultural mind, and acquaints herself, perhaps for the first time, with *her* body, *her* emotions, *her* sexuality, *her* intuition, *her* images, *her* values, and *her* mind” (p. 90). Through the descent process a woman often remembers that her mind and body are one, and when she emerges she is prepared to embark on a path toward embodiment, of uniting body and spirit.

Esbjörn (2003) used intuitive inquiry, the research method I used in this study, to explore the relationship between body and spirit among contemporary women mystics. Her central finding emerged through interviews with 12 women mystics and multiple cycles of interpretation, and was valuable for understanding what many women experience on the other side of the initial descent, on a lifelong spiritual path. Esbjörn wrote

Women who have devoted their lives to God, to a path of spiritual inquiry, tend to go through a process of misidentification and re-identification with the body. This process on first sight may appear to be sequential in nature, but upon further inquiry this process reveals itself as a dialectic between identification with emptiness and re-identification with form, taking place over and over, deepening throughout one’s lifetime. (p. 214)

Many of the women in the study described their reluctance toward embodiment, or desire to disidentify from the body early on, in and at various points during their spiritual development. Esbjörn attributed this tendency to multiple contributing factors, including “a painful childhood,

an intuition or memory of a transcendent realm, the religious doctrine which one was immersed in, cultural messages that led to self-negation of the body, or a simple preference for spiritual realms over human realms” (2003, p. 218). While some of the women experienced disengagement from the body as freeing, others experienced it as “disconnection or dissociation from the body” (p. 220). However, as the women in Esbjörn’s study each journeyed toward nondual embodiment they felt “a growing capacity for self-acceptance in relation to one’s body and oneself” (p. 223) that “seemed to be a necessary feature for many women in their spiritual maturation” (p. 223). Esbjörn speculated that women “who are notoriously critical of our bodies” (p. 224) might first need “to love our bodies before we consider an authentic movement toward transcendence” (p. 224). Otherwise, women risk leaving the body behind before becoming fully embodied and, ultimately, integrated.

The most compelling aspect of Esbjörn’s (2003) study was that her participants traversed beyond loving the body and early transpersonal development into what she described as a dialectic of initial disidentification from the often painful material body, reidentification with a loved body, and further nondual, disidentification with the body that may represent women’s ongoing, cyclical pattern of transpersonal development. As women in her study entered into the “vibrant, fleshy, spacious existence” (p. 231) of nondual embodiment, they experienced bringing “an expanded awareness, a sense of the divine into every aspect of life including relationships; sexuality; the cells and bone and blood and breath of our bodies; parenting; and even politics” (p. 231). This nondual embodiment was an awakening and transformation of the body at a cellular level that resonated with the experience of permeability described by Anderson and Hopkins (1991). Esbjörn (2003) demonstrated that body, sexuality, and spirituality are inextricably interconnected for women and unfold coextensively as women develop transpersonally.

Women may need to recover their connectedness to the senses and alienated nature, and, through that connectedness, deepen into embodied existence (Abram, 1996; Adams, 1993). While the literature of embodiment pointed to the direction that is needed for women to become fully embodied, consideration of the means by which that process might be undertaken often focused on authentic movement, dance, and other forms of creative movement (Stromsted, 1999, 2001; Woodman, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1996) or traditional forms of spiritual practice (Daniels, 2005). Stromsted (1999, 2001) demonstrated that “Authentic Movement can assist women in reinhabiting themselves, bringing them back into contact with their instinctual wisdom, their sense of self and, in the process, teach them to value their embodied sense of knowing” (2001, p. 40). However, there were no studies that considered distance running in nature as a catalyst or facilitator of transformative experience, and thus potential ongoing, embodied spiritual practice, for women.

Psychospiritual Development

Linear, stage theories of spiritual development had not adequately addressed the body or embodiment in women’s lives, when in fact the transformation from disembodiment to full embodiment may be essential for full spiritual development (Washburn 1995, 2003). Fowler’s (1995, 2001) well-known stages of faith identified six developmental stages that require completion of each stage before moving closer toward a rarely achieved universalizing faith that transcends religious and cultural categories. Fowler universalized the stages of faith themselves, suggesting that all humans develop along this trajectory. Slee (2004) revisited Fowler’s (1995, 2001) stage theory from the perspective of women’s lived experiences through interviews with 30 women who identified as either Christian or marginally Christian. She delineated three patterns in women’s faith development—alienation, awakening, and relationality—that offer

insight into the particular spiritual experiences of women influenced by Christianity. Slee's findings did not, however, address the body, embodiment, or nontraditional spiritual practice in women's development.

Wilber (2000, 2006) also presented a stage theory of development that suggested gender identity and norms are important variables in the early developmental structures but are later transcended. By the vision-logic stage of adulthood gender androgyny develops, followed by archetypal union of gender and finally transcendence beyond gender. While Wilber's consideration of gender in his developmental model suggests that women in patriarchal culture must work through barriers imposed from within and without by the gender binary system, the relationship between women's embodiment and psychospiritual development is not specifically addressed.

The clear pattern in the literature on women's psychospiritual development was that of a cycling or spiraling dynamic or process of transformation that is reflected in other transpersonal approaches to psychospiritual development, not focused on women's particular experiences, but applicable to women's development (Hart, 2000; Ruumet, 1997, 2006; Washburn, 1995, 2003). Washburn (2003) presented an especially strong case for embodiment in transpersonal development through his spiral model. On the spiral path, mental ego and experiential body coevolve through prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal stages. As the infant moves into childhood,

the ego ceases *being* the body and becomes a mental ego that *has* a body. This differentiation is not a Cartesian dissociation of the mind from the body, for the body remains a dimension of self. The body is still part of what the ego is, but it is now an extension rather than the whole of what the ego is. (2003, p. 153)

For healthy ego development, the child must then transform from body ego to mental ego, becoming primarily a mental being, until ego development is complete and “the ego begins to experience a need to restore what has been sacrificed” (2003, p. 156).

What was significant about the spiral model for this study was the proposition that mind-body integration is fundamental to transpersonal development. The spiritually maturing adult moves through a time of disembodied mind that is necessary for transpersonal development, but then returns “home” (Washburn, 2003, p. 168) to an awakened, fleshly body in which Spirit is known. The adult entering the final stage of Ego-Ground integration returns to the unbounded physical existence with the universe experienced by the infant at a much higher, subtler level. While the spiral model is not gender specific, it offers a model of transpersonal development that becomes possible when women transcend the gendered mind-body dualism of Western culture in becoming and living as whole, embodied beings.

Unlike Fowler and Wilber, Anderson (1999, 2008) articulated awareness and knowing of embodied being, and her Body Map model provided a bridge between embodiment and human development through nuanced description of embodied growth. In this model, the increasingly embodied being moves through 10 axes and five return cycles of development, resolving trauma and completing what remains incomplete from earlier embodied states, toward greater integration and wholeness. The first five axes focus on early stages of bodily development often seen in infants, children, and adolescents. During Axis 5, *Competence Body*, an individual develops bodily “mastery, skill, and competence” (Anderson, 2008, p. 8), that becomes a doorway for further levels of transpersonal development. Later stages, *Compassion Body*, *Presence Body*, *Awareness Body*, *Awakening Body*, and *Enlightenment Body* (Anderson, 2008), parallel the mature, and possibly transpersonal, stages of ego-development seen in the theory of

Cook-Greuter (2005). The strength of the Body Map for my study was its specific focus on human development from the lived perspective of the body. However, acknowledging that other developmental theories articulate whole person development, Anderson does not situate bodily development within the wider context of human development nor that it must be applied concurrent with other developmental theories. Nevertheless, the Body Map provides a valuable starting point for exploring embodied development through women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature.

In sum, the literature reviewed revealed space for the exploration of women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development, and the opportunity for this study to contribute to our current understandings of transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development. Most of the literature reviewed had explored women's experiences using qualitative methods, and I anticipated this study would add to the richness of those narratives and understandings.

Cycle 2: Developing the Preliminary Interpretive Lenses

During Cycle 2 of an intuitive inquiry, the researcher attempts to articulate her "personal values, assumptions and understanding of the research topic as preliminary interpretive lenses *prior* to data gathering" (Anderson, 2011a, p. 39). She again engages the research topic through imaginal dialogue with a set of texts directly related to the topic, seeking to illuminate and clarify the existing hermeneutical lenses with which she is knowingly approaching the study. In Cycle 4, she will return to these identified lenses to consider how her perspective has changed in light of the findings.

In August, as I was completing the proposal for this study, I decided to join the charity running team for *Girls on the Run of Northern Arizona*, the organization I serve as director of, to

train for an urban marathon with fellow women runners, the first I would run in 5 years. Still struggling with posttraumatic stress related fatigue, I intuited that the intensity of the training process would generate renewed physical and emotional strength for the dissertation journey and offer unexpected insight into the research. I was drawn to the opportunity to focus on running a challenging distance once again, to share in the community of runners, and to witness the physical, emotional, and other likely changes within me that often accompany marathon preparation.

While immersed in the literature of trauma for the proposal literature review, my own lived experience of the impact of trauma on the whole person, the long familiar pendulum-like swinging between chaos and rigidity within my own mind and body, came clearly into view and called me to approach my own body as a reflective “text” in the formation of my initial hermeneutical lenses. In recent months, I had become aware of, and been closely observing, the ways in which my own history of traumatic experience had left its residual presence on my physical movement and biorhythms, emotional reactions, and resonance with other humans, animals, landscapes, and even the elements. The dualistic tension between my childhood view of running alone as potentially dangerous for women with my adult experience of distance running in nature as deeply transformative was indicative of this traumatized self, a self I knew intimately, from the inside out.

As the training progressed, I developed a much more subtle level of attunement to energy moving through my body, the ways in which food, weather, landscape, people, and all that I engaged with or within, either served as sources of regenerative energy, or stimulated what I called “the slow leak” of depletion that could operate at nearly imperceptible levels at times. I also noticed shifts in the way my body physiologically “registered” resonance and communicated

its meaning. The sensitivity that had once been essential for survival, the somatic reactivity accompanied by fright and feelings of entrapment that becomes the mark of prey (Levine, 1997, 2010; Levine & Kline, 2007), was now remaking itself into a new, healing form of sensing, a source of quiet, perceptive embodied wisdom for receiving and interpreting the world. This transformed awareness had been bubbling within me for some time, but now the quality of my attunement was perceptively richer and more textured, freed somehow from my prior need to guard my own vulnerable permeability. As fall shifted into early winter in the mountainous, high elevation landscape where I live, I continued to run long distances on forest roads and trails alone and with my training partners, and continued to read and reflect upon my own transforming embodiment. In dialogue with many of the texts on trauma discussed earlier in this literature review, the development of my Cycle 2 hermeneutical lenses occurred in two phases.

The first phase followed a brief period of feeling stuck, during which I exerted great effort trying to rationally extract lenses from the proposal rather than allow them to emerge from a deeper knowing. I had finalized my proposal literature review a month early and had been reading and reflecting closely upon the trauma and transformation literature, with a particular attention to how processes of change take place, the movement of change.

When I gave up the effort, 17 lenses related to the substance of my topic flowed forth onto paper within 45 minutes. Weeks later, on a frosty cold October morning after an overnight rain that turned into ice on the back porch, I moved from tending to pets, to washing dishes, to finally eating a bowl of warm cereal before a planned run. My laptop computer was sitting on the kitchen counter, and as I turned it in on to get a weather update before heading outside, 9 lenses related to the research method and procedural steps presented themselves to my mind, in nearly

complete form. I spent about 25 minutes crafting them and then headed outdoors for my usual morning run with Cycle 2 feeling complete.

The substantive lenses were:

1. Distance running in nature can serve as a deeply meaningful embodied spiritual practice for women, especially those developing feminine spiritual consciousness outside of traditional religious communities and practices.
2. Running generates a sense of trust within the body that is fundamental to psychospiritual development.
3. Deepening our connection to, and relationship with, nature through the body can facilitate the healing of insecure attachment or difficulty in human relationships.
4. Female embodiment is a process of moving from alienation from the body, often experienced as numbness, or lack of awareness, care, or appreciation for the body, to becoming and living as a fully sensing, feeling, connected, relational female body.
5. In patriarchal, dualistic cultures that split mind and body, and denigrate the female body, women's experiences of being bodies are commonly impacted by interpersonal trauma and insecure attachment.
6. In Western culture, embodiment is necessary for women's psychospiritual development and may require the healing trauma or insecure attachment to overcome barriers to growth.
7. Distance running in nature cultivates women's capacity to transform and transcend barriers to embodiment, including trauma and insecure attachment, by facilitating awareness of movement, instincts, senses, and feelings.

8. Distance running in nature can potentiate transformative experiences and processes in women's lives by engaging the meditative and contemplative capacities of the body and mind.
9. Transformative experiences while running will shift a woman's relationship to her body and running from that of an "object" needing to be exercised, altered, or improved, to being a "subject" motivated by a desire to engage in a practice of running defined in spiritual terms.
10. Processes of transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development, occur in spiraling cycles throughout women's lifespan, and must be described with words and images like interconnection, interrelationship, and interdependence, which point to the subtle and complex relationship between and among processes.
11. Transformative experiences are those that significantly deepen or expand a woman's awareness of, and connection to, her self, others, the world, or the sacred, or are spiritual in some other life-changing way.
12. Transformative experiences arise spontaneously from within the body when the conditions of a woman's life support their arising, rather than as a result of effort or will.
13. The conditions that support the arising of transformative experience while distance running in nature include altered states of physiology and consciousness, solitude, loss, life transitions, and changes in attachment relationships.
14. Sudden and gradual transformative experiences that occur while distance running in nature must be integrated into daily life through a regular spiritual running practice to cultivate deepening embodiment and psychospiritual growth.

15. The transformative experiences and processes of embodiment and psychospiritual development explored in this study will reflect both the particularities of individual lives and patterns of commonality among women.
16. The transformative experiences of women 28 and older will likely occur before or during periods of developmental transition, and provide inner resources for navigating life transitions.
17. If a woman began running for reasons related to poor body image, exercise, or competition, a transformative experience will likely shift her motivation for running to reasons related to psychological well-being or spirituality.

The *Methodological and Procedural Lenses* were:

1. Women who experience significant resonance in response to the topic of this study, and the process of participating in writing, will feel as though they must participate for a known or unknown reason.
2. My bodily and emotional resonance with women's experiences shared during the screening interview will ensure the selection of participants who will contribute meaningful experiences to the study.
3. Writing about transformative experiences in solitude, using embodied writing, will allow women to feel their experiences more fully and deeply than if they were to describe them to me in a face-to-face interview.
4. Engaging in a three-step writing process of responding to background questions that contextualize their experience, recollecting and describing their experience, and responding to interview questions that encourage reflection on the meaning of the

experience will facilitate women's further insight into, and integration of, their experience.

5. Approaching and interpreting women's writings as sacred texts will allow me to intuit deeper levels of complexity and meaning than I might in response to an interview or reading a transcript.
6. My own regular practices of distance running in nature and dream work will prepare me to serve as a researcher "instrument," allowing me to gain intuitive insight into women's experiences.
7. Interpreting a woman's embodied writings about her experiences within the context of her life, provided by her responses to the background and interview questions, will both illuminate the particular significance of the experience for her life and point to shared patterns in women's embodiment and psychospiritual development.
8. Working with women's writings will provide further insight into, and integration of, my own transformative experiences, facilitating my own deepening embodiment and psychospiritual growth in the process of completing this study.
9. Self-reported transformation during the reported experience, following the experience, or while participating in this study confirms the validity of findings that the identified experience contributed to a women's embodiment and psychospiritual development.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Meanings are self-organized, regulated internally and private as well as dyadically organized, regulated with others, and shared. When self-organized meaning-making is successful, new meanings are made and become part of the individual's state of consciousness. When meanings are dyadically organized, a *dyadic* state of consciousness emerges between the individuals and contains new *cocreated* meanings, which in turn can be appropriated by each individual into his or her state of consciousness. . . . Successful self- or self-and-other creation of new meanings leads to an expansion of the complexity and coherence of the individual's state of consciousness. (Tronick, 2009, p. 87)

Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. The primary questions this study sought to address were: (a) In what ways does regular distance running in nature potentiate transformative experiences, and the transformational process, for a woman? (b) What internal and external barriers, including trauma and insecure attachment, do women face in evolving as psychological and spiritual persons, and how does distance running in nature serve as a catalyst or facilitator for transforming and transcending those barriers? (c) In what ways is a woman's embodiment and psychospiritual development impacted by transformative experience and the transformational process? and (d) What is the relationship between transformation, embodiment, and psychospiritual development among women for whom distance running in nature is a spiritual practice? One objective of this study was to create helpful metaphors, terms, and definitions for describing and communicating the experiences explored in this study, where none currently exist.

The research method used was intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2011a, 2011b), an embodied approach to research that engages the researcher in multiple cycles of hermeneutical interpretation "to explore complex human experiences" (2011a, p. 19). Intuitive inquiry was developed by Rosemarie Anderson as an "epistemology of the heart" (Anderson,

2004, p. 308) that invites the researcher to begin with her own subjective experience and enter into intimate and potentially transformative dialogue with participants whose experiences resonate with her own.

“In poetic terms, the impulse to conduct an intuitive inquiry begins like a light in the dark of winter because this impulse to explore a topic claims the researcher’s imagination often in an unconscious and surreptitious way” (2011a, p. 15), writes Anderson. The impulse then becomes fully illuminated through five cycles of hermeneutical interpretation of texts, which might include sacred texts, personal narrative, or even the body as expressed through embodied writing (Anderson, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2011c). During the first Cycle of the hermeneutical process, the researcher identifies and clarifies her topic using a creative process of imaginal dialogue. The result is a clear statement of the research topic to be reflected on in Cycle 2, during which the researcher names the current hermeneutical lenses through which she “sees” the topic. Upon completion of these forward arcing, or outward turning steps, the researcher begins the return arc, an inward turn, with the data collection and report-writing of Cycle 3. The procedures used in collecting qualitative data during this cycle may vary, as intuitive inquiry does not prescribe rules for data collection, allowing the researcher to choose or create analytic procedures that will uplift the researcher’s unique intuitive strengths and honor the topic and participants’ experiences. During Cycle 4, the researcher revisits, redefines, and renews the lenses named during the second Cycle through the insights gleaned through the researcher’s engagement with the participants’ voices. During the fifth and final Cycle of the intuitive inquiry, the researcher weaves together the renewed lenses based upon participants’ experiences and the empirical and theoretical literature in a discussion of the research results. Here, inductive theory building and

the cultivation of wisdom may arise. Throughout the hermeneutical circle, the researcher risks being deeply transformed by the topic she has chosen, or that has chosen her.

Within an intuitive inquiry, validity is primarily determined by the principle of sympathetic resonance (Anderson, 1998, 2000) and the ability of the research to transform the researcher, participants, and readers. Anderson explains sympathetic resonance using an analogy:

If someone plucks a string on a cello on one side of a room, a string of a cello on the opposite side will begin to vibrate, too. Striking a tuning fork will vibrate another some distance away. The resonance communicates and connects directly and immediately without intermediaries except for air and space. (1998, p. 73)

As the analogy suggests, the experience of resonance for a human being engages the “instrument” of the body and thus prepares the whole person for potential transformation. Resonance expands validity beyond, for example, logic, through which a measured moment of intellectual insight might occur but the transformation of the whole person is unlikely. In addition to mapping “consonant, dissonant, and neutral sympathetic resonance” (Anderson, 1998, p. 75) throughout the course of the study, a resonance panel might be conducted to measure the universality of the experience.

Embodied writing (Anderson, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2011a, 2011b) inspires sympathetic resonance in readers through the use of words that convey the emotional and sensual experiences of the writer through the viewpoint of the body. The seven distinctive features of embodied writing (Anderson, 2001) are as follows:

1. Vivid descriptions of experiences that invite resonance from readers.
2. Inclusion of internal and external data that invite readers to participate directly in the experience.
3. The experience is described from inside the body to the outside.
4. Concrete, multisensory detail is conveyed slowly and in the present.

5. Descriptions reflect full attunement of the body in experience.
6. First-person narratives are embedded in personal experience.
7. Artful, creative expression is used to serve embodied depictions of experience.

Participants in this study were taught to use embodied writing to communicate their transformational experiences of distance running in nature. I also used embodied writing to articulate my own experiences with the topic and explore and present the research findings.

My selection of intuitive inquiry as the primary research method for this study, and embodied writing as both research tool and approach to writing, was based upon my own experience with the research topic, my own intuitive skills, and the feminist paradigm that informs how I approach researching women's lives. Seven years ago I was pulled into the topic of this study by a subtle and profound experience of distance running in nature that transformed me in body, heart, mind, and soul. For the next year, I found it difficult to articulate the experience, and more difficult to know how to act on the inner changes that resulted from the experience, yet my body was brimming over with passion and energy to do something with this experience. Then I read a paragraph in a popular running magazine that highlighted a woman whose transformative running experience outdoors led her to establish a national nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the lives of girls and women through running. Within a few weeks, I was reading the story of Barker's transformative run in July 1993 (2004). Her embodied telling of her experience resonated so deeply with me that within a year I was establishing a regional council of *Girls on the Run*, the international organization that was born during her 1993 run, and sharing the connection between my experience and Barker's with other women, whose stories likewise resonated with our stories. Intuitive inquiry and embodied writing thus seemed the most natural approach to a formal, systematic study of women's

transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development.

When considering spiritual topics, the hermeneutical process has traditionally been applied to sacred texts of religion that women have rarely authored and only recently been invited, or assumed the right, to interpret. Within intuitive inquiry, the definition of “text,” including spiritual text, is significantly expanded to include the lived experiences of research participants. From a feminist perspective, intuitive inquiry as a research method is empowering for women as researchers and participants, and potentially transformative in considering women’s spiritual development. In patriarchal cultures, women often look to external forms of authority for the truth about the universe, the sacred, and their own lives. Intuitive inquiry invites women researchers and participants to look to the texts of their own lives as authoritative and sacred, and to trust the wisdom of their embodied intuitions, feelings, and senses.

Anderson (2011a) has supervised over 30 studies using intuitive inquiry, and a number of those researchers have incorporated samples of participants’ embodied writing, or used embodied writing themselves. Dufrechou (2002) and Sheppard (2006), in particular, both used the Internet to locate participants for their studies and then used embodied writings gathered via email from their participants as their primary data. Their dissertations were helpful in developing the approach used in this study that sought participation from women beyond where I live.

Researcher as Research “Instrument”

The first step in preparing myself to be an “instrument” for this study was to have a transformative experience while distance running in nature and engage in ongoing writing and transpersonal reflection about the experience. Two other practices I used to prepare myself for this research project, to maintain myself as a conduit of intuitive knowing throughout the process

of hermeneutical cycles, and to gain intuitive insight into the topic and research data, were an ongoing practice of distance running in nature, and journaling and “being with” my dreams.

Each day that I engaged in work for this research project, I ran in nature for at least 60 minutes, to calm my central nervous system, heighten my own embodied and intuitive awareness, remain connected to transformative experiences while running whether in memory or the immediate lived moment, remember the sacredness and wisdom of my own female body, and enliven my own sense of being part of nature. On most occasions, I ran at dawn, as darkness was opening into light, or shortly thereafter, so the natural transition from night to day could serve as an embodied reminder of the balance between unconscious and conscious processes, the inner and the outer, introversion and extraversion, and other polarities that must be harmonized in a fruitful intuitive inquiry.

In addition to running, dreaming was a transpersonal experience that I used skillfully to guide and inform research into women’s transformative experiences. The process of dreaming results in dreams—images that arise during sleep usually in narrative form—which the researcher may incubate, recall, journal or record, amplify, interpret, analyze, dramatize, or interact with in other ways. Such engagement with dreams may provide the researcher insight into her relationship with the research subject and participants, how to structure or solve a problem within research, and appropriate methods for collecting, interpreting, and communicating data.

Scientific research on dreams suggests their nature and function are conducive to procedural use in transpersonal research. Kramer (2007) establishes that “the dream report is a highly organized and well constructed rendering of an experience that occurred during sleep and that may be occurring during wakefulness as well” (p. 205). Dreams are “happenings” (p. 205)

that function to regulate our affective state and upon wakefulness, in their telling, become an “orderly production” (p. 205) much like a “short story” (p. 206).

Intuitive inquiry “advocates expanded states of intuitive awareness, including but not limited to various altered states of consciousness, active dreaming and dream incubation” (Anderson, 1998, p. 76) and other “states of consciousness more typically associated with artistic process than with science, in all phases of the inquiry” (p. 76). Dreams “have the advantage of plumbing the depths of transformative experiences by being more aligned with them state specifically” (p. 76) and “may bring the creative, nonrational aspects of experience into synthesized awareness” (p. 85).

Ullman (1998) suggests that dreams reflect our immediate concerns and serve to restore emotional connections between our inner and outer experiences while our rational defenses are suspended. Our dreams make us honest by telling us the truth in the face of our unconscious and conscious attempts at self-deception. Thus, by paying attention to dreams during the research process, the researcher may become aware of how her conscious goals and biases, or rational conclusions, might be getting in the way of what the research is attempting to reveal.

Dreams can also facilitate creative and spiritual problem solving that supports research. Paying attention to dream sequences “of a progressive-sequential nature, in which a problem is stated thematically, worked on figuratively, and resolved subjectively” (Kramer, 2007, p. 71) can provide insight into how to frame and resolve a problem in research. In progressive-sequential dreams, the dreamer first sees “a metaphoric statement of the problem which is then worked on or explored and brought to some sort of figurative resolution, generally, by restating the problem in familiar, if inexact terms, and reducing it in solution to something familiar” (p. 184). These sequences, and other dreams deemed “exceptional human experiences” (White, 1998, p. 139),

have contributed to innovations in science, technology, and research. Rothberg states that “in many traditions, particularly indigenous traditions, the resolution of spiritual questions or problems may occur through practices culminating in visions or dreams bringing spiritual knowledge” (as cited in Hart, Nelson, & Puhakka, 2000, p. 173) although “few contemporary Westerners have spoken of these practices as sciences or forms of inquiry” (p. 173).

Dreaming becomes most useful when the researcher has established a relationship with her dreams and a personalized procedure for using them in research. For a number of years, I have engaged in a daily spiritual practice I call “being with” my dreams that served as an essential research skill for this study. This practice included the following steps:

1. Enter a quiet, meditative space prior to sleep and bring to mind the current state of the research including the feelings, images, and patterns that are strongly present, the questions for which I seek answers, and the joys or stumbling blocks I may be encountering. Set the intention to dream in such a manner that my direction on the research path is further revealed, that my “next steps” are made clearer.
2. Upon waking, write each dream in a dream journal in the present tense and give each narrative a title. While writing, hold the images and emotions present within the dreams in my mind, body, and heart. Sense and feel my way into the dreams and invite them to share their wisdom with me. Note associations with significant symbols in a dream or move my body as I did or as I saw done while dreaming.
3. Write a dream poem to bring forth the essence of the dream more fully. Through poetry, focus more intensely on the dream symbols, moving more deeply into the embodied and emotional qualities of the dream. Leftover feelings present in the dream may emerge despite uncertainty about the meaning of various images in the

- dream. This increased bodily and emotional awareness may reveal bridges between the waking state of my research and my unconscious awareness. It may uncover places where I am not being fully honest with myself about my relationship to the subject or the participants, provide a clearer methodological direction, offer themes or patterns in data, or inspire a metaphor for communicating my findings.
4. Additional attention to image association may be called for in the case of progressive-sequential dreams, wherein a series of dreams may be illustrating resolution of a research problem I may or may not have been conscious of.
 5. Finally, commit to dwelling with the dream images and feelings throughout the day, as though they were wise teachers with whom I have the privilege and blessing of continuing relationship. As I go about my day, washing the dishes or folding the laundry, running, working, or loving, I ask that the dreams remain present with me through the activities of waking life.
 6. If, in the course of the day, I remember previously unremembered dreams or dream images, receive “flashes” of dream images recalled earlier, or experience a strong response to a symbol or metaphor that resonates with my dream, I make note of these occurrences in my journal and revisit them as part of my ongoing dream journaling process.

While this process reflects a personally cultivated practice of working with dreams, the individual steps are not entirely unique. Dream recall, journaling narratives in the present tense, titling dreams, associating to dream images, and writing dream poems are forms of “dream work” encouraged by contemporary “dream workers,” many professional psychologists, who contend that dreams offer insight into current desires and conflicts, personality traits and

patterns, relationship dilemmas, creative solutions to problems, self-healing, and other concerns of waking life (Bogart, 2009; Delaney, 1998; Johnson, 1989; Mellick, 2001; Mindell, 2002; Taylor, 1992). Most contemporary dream workers base their theories and techniques on the writings of Freud and Jung, while also referencing the dream worldviews of the Ancients, indigenous peoples, and the world's religions.

Using this approach to dreams as an integrated research skill requires particular openness to dreams providing intuitive insight about the research process, and noting where those connections may be present and highlighted. It also requires awareness that research concerns may be interwoven with other life concerns in the dream narrative, including difficult emotions or situations for the researcher that require attention before proceeding with the research. Dreaming is as useful in uncovering the quality of presence the researcher is bringing to research, as in guiding and informing literature and participant selection, data collection, methods, and communication of findings.

During the multiple phases of this study, I engaged in daily dream recall, journaling, poetry writing, associating, and other activities that invited the deeper meaning and messages of my dreams to emerge. While being open to unexpected insight that may come in my dreams, I was also mindful of my research intentions and remained especially aware of where my waking intentions and dreams were in communication.

When preparing for research and collecting data, I consciously invited my dreams to reveal how I would conceptualize my project as a whole, including subject matter, literature selection, participant identification, and research methods, and “first steps” to ensure it was transpersonally relevant as well as personally and socially transformative. I invited my dreams to illuminate inner work needing attention to ensure I was receptive to my subject, prospective

literature, participants who came forth, unfamiliar research methods, faculty guidance, and the challenge of balancing many academic, personal, and professional commitments so my project proceeded with joy and ease. To heighten my capacity to receive information and organize data, I was attuned to where images or symbols related to listening, collecting, or organizing appeared in my dreams.

Having chosen a subject that was potentially transformative on personal and social levels, it was essential to leave unstructured space and time in my days while working with research data to just be with my dreams and allow them to share their wisdom. My dreams worked intensely on me during this time, the path forward at times became unclear or unsettling, and I need grounding at times to ensure I remained solidly present in waking life as well as dreaming. While working with research data, my dreams revealed strong emotions inherent within the participants' embodied writings or responses to research questions, and illuminated my own unresolved issues stimulated by the research that I needed to attend to through my personal and academic support system. Recurring images or symbols provided insight into patterns of meaning in the data, or where a new direction was needed. Select progressive-sequential dreams provided a clear direction in which to proceed with communicating my findings when I began to encounter a sense of "stuckness" in waking life.

While communicating findings, my dreams pointed to how the participants and I were being transformed by the research process and began to reveal what the completed written findings would tell of our shared story. I opened myself to dreams that offered useful metaphors for articulating patterns of meaning that emerged in the research to expand readers' conceptual understanding of the subject matter. Metaphors that invited me to experience unity with the

topic, creative inspiration, joy, and ease in the writing process, and complete the project according to my timeline were also welcomed.

Participants

The most important screening criteria for this study were whether or not the transformative distance running experiences of potential participants resonated with the “essence” of my own experience, were likely to contribute to my understanding of the study topic, and if potential participants resonated with the study topic and believed participation would enrich their lives. Resonance was assessed by my feeling “in tune,” or in harmony, emotionally, physically, or in some other way, with the participant’s experience, or by the participant feeling “in tune” with the study topic and approach. Participants were also able to articulate their experiences in subtle and nuanced ways using embodied writing, and open to the possibility of further transformation in the process of participating in the study. My initial hope was that participants would be diverse in age, ethnicity, religious background, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, parenthood and relational status, geographic location, and other unanticipated ways to more fully represent women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature.

A flyer inviting participation was designed and posted on my personal Facebook page for distribution among “friends,” emailed to online communities and organizations oriented toward trail running, distance running, and women’s spirituality, and emailed to *Girls on the Run International* for distribution to affiliated council leaders through their weekly email newsletter to recruit prospective participants. The flyer asked: *Have you had an experience while distance running in nature that significantly deepened or expanded your awareness of, and connection to,*

your self, others, the world, and/or the sacred, or was transformative or spiritual for you in some other life-changing way?

The following criteria of eligibility for prospective participants were also identified on the flyer:

1. Female.
2. 28 years or older.
3. Currently in good physical health (may be experiencing illness or had recent surgery if condition is not likely to interfere with your full participation in study).
4. Psychologically stable.
5. Able to meet the 6-8 hour time commitment of the study.
6. Able and willing to share personal experiences and communicate in writing via email and a secure data collection website.
7. Willing and able to learn and use a writing approach called “embodied writing” for this study.
8. Have run distances of 3.1 miles or longer, at least 3 times per week, for 2 or more years, and are currently engaged in a regular practice of distance running in nature.
9. Willing to identify your running as a meditative or contemplative spiritual practice, or in some way central to your spiritual life.
10. Able to articulate a transformative experience meaningful for this study, clearly and coherently, using embodied writing, upon learning this approach.
11. Able to reflect upon those experiences in relation to their embodiment and psychospiritual development using embodied writing.

Women were ineligible to participate if they:

1. Were under 28.
2. Were currently experiencing major illness or recent major surgery that could compromise their full participation in the study.
3. Were self-reportedly psychologically unstable, or had been treated within the past year for depression or disordered eating.
4. Had a major psychological diagnosis or history that could compromise their full participation in the study.
5. Had a history of incomplete attendance in previous research studies or are unable to commit fully to the study at this time.
6. Were pregnant.
7. Were unable to articulate their experiences in writing or did not have email access.
8. Ran distances under 3.1 miles, ran infrequently, ran solely indoors or on treadmills, or had been running for less than 2 years.
9. Ran solely for the purpose of aerobic exercise, managing weight, altering their appearance, or competition, and did not consider running a meditative or contemplative spiritual practice.
10. Were unable to articulate an experience meaningful for the study, or are unable to reflect clearly or coherently upon their experiences.

During the proposal stage of this study, I planned to include 25-30 female participants age 28 or older. Ideally, I intended to recruit participants diverse in age, ethnicity, religious background, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, parenthood and relational status, geographic location, and other unanticipated ways to more fully represent women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature.

Initially, 27 women living within the United States were confirmed to participate in the study. However, 4 did not complete participation due to time limitations resulting from family, work, or educational commitments, or other unanticipated stressor or illness. Written data provided by 23 of those women were included in the study findings described in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. All of the women lived in small cities or towns, or urban suburbs, with access to wilderness areas and/or large parks with significant natural space. One woman lived in each of the following states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, and Texas. Five women lived in the Denver, Colorado area, and 11 lived in the Flagstaff, Arizona area where I reside. Of those participants living in Flagstaff, Arizona, I had at least some acquaintance with 8 of them. Two of the women were in their late 20s, 10 were in their 30s, 7 were in their 40s, 3 were in their 50s, and 1 was in her 60s. Nineteen of the women identified as European-American, 2 as Jewish-American, 1 as Swedish-American, and 1 as Norwegian-American. Twenty-two of the women identified as heterosexual and 1 identified as bisexual. One woman reported high school as the highest level of education she had completed, 11 women had completed post high school professional training, a 2-year college degree, or a Bachelor's degree, 2 women had completed a Bachelor's degree and some graduate school, 7 women had completed Master's degrees, and 1 had completed a Doctoral degree. Seventeen of the women identified themselves as married or in a relationship, and 6 identified themselves as single. Thirteen of the women reported having no children, 2 had one child, 7 had two children or stepchildren, and 1 had three children. Twenty-one women were employed in professional, service, or academic positions, and 2 were homemakers. Twenty women reported individual or household incomes in the low to high middle-income ranges (\$22,000-\$200,000), 1 woman who was a full-time college student reported an income that would qualify as low by the U.S. Federal

government, and 2 women did not report incomes but were employed in full-time work. Twelve women identified a Protestant Christian denomination as the religion of their family of origin, 7 identified Roman Catholicism, 2 were raised Jewish, and 2 came from nonreligious homes. When asked their current religion, 2 reported Roman Catholic, 4 nondenominational Christian, 2 reported a Protestant Christian denomination, 2 reported being influenced by Buddhism, 8 reported “none,” “not affiliated,” or “nonorganized,” or “in search of,” and the remaining 5 identified “Spiritual,” “Agnostic,” “Atheist,” “Nature,” and “Naturalist.”

Procedure

Initial respondents to the flyer who expressed interest in participating in the study were emailed an introductory letter with a description of the study, a consent form, a demographics form to identify diversity as listed above, and a sample of embodied writing (Appendix A). They were asked to complete and return the consent and demographics forms to me via mail or email. Upon receipt of these forms from a prospective participant, I scheduled and conducted a screening interview with her via telephone. At the start of the screening interview, I explained the importance of resonance to, and how it was defined in, this study, and asked the prospective participant to describe how the study topic resonated with her experience, and why she was interested in participating in the study. Then, I reviewed the eligibility criteria listed above with her, and asked her if she met those criteria. If so, I asked her to describe at least one experience meaningful for this study. All of the women I conducted screening interviews with were suitable for the study, were informed of this at the conclusion of the telephone call, and were invited to confirm their participation immediately or via email within a week.

Each confirmed participant committed to completing a three-step online data collection process by agreed upon deadlines. For each step in the data collection process, participants

received an email that provided detailed instructions for completing the step, and a link to a secure data collection survey created through the web site SurveyMonkey to be used for submitting their writing. During the first step, participants were asked to provide written responses to the following background questions:

1. Please describe your current running practice, and your past and present relationship to running.
2. Please describe your religious and spiritual history, and your current religious or spiritual life.
3. Have you experienced emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, or any other form of abuse or neglect, or experienced or witnessed violence, or experienced any other significantly traumatic event or loss, at any point in your life? If so, please describe in as much detail as you are comfortable with.

During the second step, participants were emailed a request to write an embodied recollection of one or more transformative experiences while distance running in nature using embodied writing. The email included these instructions for completing the embodied writing:

Set aside an extended period of time for recollection, reflection, and writing in a quiet place. Once you are settled in this place, breathe deeply to quiet your body and mind. When feeling calm and relaxed, recall an experience you've had while distance running in nature that significantly deepened or expanded your awareness of, and connection to, your self, others, the world, and/or the sacred, or was transformative or spiritual for you in some other life-changing way. Re-live the experience in your imagination, bringing to awareness the emotions and bodily sensations that were present. Once fully aware of the experience, prepare to write about it. Set the intention that your reader will be able to "feel" the experience as though it were her own.

Describe the experience in as much detail as possible from the perspective of your emotions and bodily sensations. Describe how the experience was transformative or spiritual for you in some life-changing way.

Upon receipt of participants' initial writings, if needed, I guided participants in deepening their writings, and invited them to add to the data to ensure their writing was as rich and descriptive as possible. Participants were given as many opportunities as desired to revise their writing within the data-gathering time frame. Once their writings were complete, I asked them to complete the final step by responding to the following semistructured interview questions through SurveyMonkey:

1. Why did you choose to focus on this experience for this study?
2. How has this experience significantly deepened or expanded your awareness of and connection to your self, others, the world, or the sacred, or been transformative or spiritual for you in some other life-changing way?
3. What changes in your daily life, and your overall experience of, or relationship to, running, do you attribute to this experience?
4. Are there any metaphors that convey the transformative quality of this experience for you?
5. What significant life events were you experiencing at the time, if any? Where does this experience fit within the larger context of your life?
6. In what ways has this experience, and running in general, impacted your "embodiment," or sense of "being a body?"
7. What is your current understanding of the relationship between "being a body" and spirituality?

8. In what ways has the process of writing about this experience, or addressing these questions, impacted you?
9. Is there anything else you would like me to know about you, or your life, in regard to this experience or your participation in this study?

Additional questions that contextualized the experience, and invited meaning making about the experience and the process of writing about it, were developed for each participant if her response to these initial questions seemed incomplete. During the course of the study, 4 women who had begun the study determined they were no longer willing or able to participate. These women were thanked for their participation to date and immediately excused from the study. Three of these 4 women had completed no more than the first step of data collection and their writings were not included in the results and discussion of this dissertation. One of the women completed two steps of the study, including the embodied writing about her experience, and consented to the inclusion of her writing in the results and discussion where possible. Data from a total of 23 women were included in this dissertation.

Once each woman had completed her embodied writing account of her transformative experience, and provided responses to the interview questions, I thanked her for her participation in the study, and informed her that once I had compiled preliminary findings for the study she would be invited to offer resonance-based feedback on those. If a woman shared traumatic experiences in the course of her participation, I confirmed that she had support resources available if needed. Upon development of the primary findings, all women included in the study were emailed a document for their review and invitation to provide feedback by a set deadline. Upon completion of the study, I sent a copy of the completed study to each participant via email.

Treatment of Data

The central data for this study were embodied writings about women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature, and responses to interview questions, collected via SurveyMonkey, an secure online data collection website. Like Stromsted (2001), I hoped to access women's writings, "their descriptions about their direct experience, *before* they (have) been further abstracted or reinterpreted through the lens of the still-dominant patriarchal cultural paradigm" (p. 41). All of these embodied writings, and written responses to interview questions, were treated as sacred texts written by the participants, as spiritually authoritative sources of divine wisdom worthy of careful reading and reflection, when I had prepared for research through distance running in nature and dream work, and had created ritual space for being with them. All writings and other data were kept in confidence and participants were asked to select a pseudonym or have one chosen for them. Excerpts from embodied writings about transformative experiences are presented verbatim in the study and all reporting on the data and findings have been communicated in embodied writing, honoring my own and the participants' experiences by articulating the subtle emotions and bodily sensation that arose for me within the transformative process of data analysis.

Chapter 4: Cycle 3, Data Collection, and Data Summaries

Cycle 3, Overview

During the third cycle of an intuitive inquiry,

the researcher (a) identifies the best source(s) of data for the research topic, (b) develops criteria for the selection of data from among these sources, (c) collects the data, and (d) prepares summary reports in as descriptive a manner as possible. (Anderson, 2011a, p. 45)

The writings of 23 women who identified distance running in nature as a meditative or contemplative spiritual practice, or as being in various ways central to their spiritual lives, and were able to articulate a transformative experience meaningful for this study, are included in the data summaries presented in this chapter. These summaries were distilled from 150 pages of original data. All of the women responded in writing to three background questions and provided at least one written account of a transformative experience while distance running in nature using embodied writing. Twenty-two of the women responded in writing to 9 interview questions addressing the meaning of the experience for them upon submission of their embodied writing account.

Because this study was exploratory in nature, I sought to include as much data as possible within the required limits. However, due to the significant amount of data generated by this study, I read carefully through all of the writings and selected those words, phrases, sentences, and larger excerpts that I sensed, through my own embodied resonance, reflected the fullest essence of a woman's response to a question or her experience. During the first reading of the writings, the creation and experience of rhythm emerged as a common theme, so during the distillation process I paid close attention to my felt sense of the inherent rhythmic (or arrhythmic) pattern that began to characterize each account of a transformative experience, while

attempting to “hold” embodied space for the universal and particular to reveal themselves in both the transformative experiences and question responses.

During that Cycle 3 distillation process, I began to recognize where the data fell into six categories of summarization that would allow for the presentation of new data with minimal duplication or repetition. Those categories and their respective summaries are organized as the major sections of this chapter:

1. Participants’ Reasons for Participating in Study and Demographic Characteristics
2. Contexts of Women’s Transformative Experiences While Distance Running in Nature
3. Significant Life Events Occurring at the Time of the Transformative Experiences
4. Women’s Transformative Experiences While Distance Running in Nature
5. Impact of Distance Running in Nature on Women’s Embodiment and Spirituality
6. Impact of Study Participation Upon Women

In the first section, I provide a thematic summary of participants’ expressed reasons for participating in this study gathered during the phone screening interviews and first step of written data collection, followed by a brief sketch of characteristics from each woman’s completed demographics form. In the second and third sections, I provide a thematic summary of participants’ written responses to background and interview questions asked in the first and third steps of the data collection process that explore the context of their transformative experiences. Verbatim excerpts from their writings are included for illustrative purposes.

Excerpts from each woman’s embodied writing account of her transformative experience while distance running in nature, and responses to interview questions that invited her to reflect upon and articulate the meaning of the experience, are presented in the third section. These accounts are not ordered thematically or with any other interpretive process in mind. They are

presented in the order of the participant characteristics list, which is organized by chronological age from the youngest to the oldest participant, simply reflecting the chronological reality of the human lifespan, but not necessarily suggesting that any linear development insights could be deduced from their order. My hope is that the reader will take note of his or her own embodied resonance while reading each for the first time, notice the inherent rhythm within the account, and pause to settle into full awareness of those feelings and sensations.

In the fifth section, verbatim excerpts from the responses provided by 23 of the women to interview questions asking for their perspectives on their transformative experiences, embodiment, and spirituality during the third step of data collection are presented. My intention is to provide the reader the opportunity to experience representative examples of these meaning-making writings as fully and directly as possible, as they are foundational to the questions explored in this study.

The final section provides a summary of responses to a third step interview question that inquired about the impact of participating in the study on the women's perceptions of their transformative experiences while distance running in nature, and their lives, often in unexpected ways. My hope is that this section provides a starting point for considering how the use of this writing process outside of a research context might benefit women.

While each woman completed the data collection process in three steps that provided the opportunity for her to create narrative coherence at the time, the data is not presented in such a way as to maintain a narrative flow for each individual, with the exception of presenting excerpts from the embodied accounts and select meaning-making interview questions for each woman in the fourth section. An inevitable consequence of intuitive inquiry is that the creation of hermeneutical lenses during Cycles 2 and 4 "can disrupt the structure of data that requires story

or narrative for meaning” (Anderson, 2011a, p. 68). Approaching women’s experiences from the theoretical perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development required that I break free of any continuous narrative pattern to explore, and allow the writings to illuminate, the specific theoretical questions posed by this study. This chapter is organized to present the data that most directly informed the hermeneutical reflection and discussion that I engaged in during Cycles 4 and 5.

Participants’ Reasons for Participating in Study and Demographic Characteristics

Prior to the start of her written participation in the study, each of the 23 women shared reasons, via telephone, for her interest in being a part of the study. All of the women revealed they engaged in a regular practice of distance running in nature that is spiritual for them, and had had at least one experience they described as transformative, multiple transformative experiences, or experiences continuously or cumulatively transformative over time. One woman indicated she had not described her experiences as transformative until she read the research flyer and felt the study questions resonate with her. The most commonly expressed reason for participating was a desire to engage in, and benefit from, the opportunity to reflect upon and write about experiences they had rarely, if ever, shared with others. Other expressed reasons for participating included general intrigue about the topic and that someone might be interested in their experiences, a desire to share personal or private experiences, a desire to help someone undertake an important project, a desire to learn from others who have had similar experiences, a personal goal of trying something new and potentially uncomfortable, the timing of the study was personally significant, the way of learning about the study was personally significant, or participation would contribute to their professional interests. A concern about participating

expressed by 1 woman was that her experience was not positive for her, but the troubling nature of it made her want to look at it more closely.

Demographic data was provided by each woman. A summary of their characteristics follows.

Cassie, age 28, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with no children, college-educated, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as a registered dietician. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies her current religion as Christian.

Kelly, age 29, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with no children, holds a Master's degree, lives in Pleasant Lake, Michigan, and works as an orientation and mobility specialist. She was raised Christian and identifies her current religion as Christian.

Abigail, age 33, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with no children, holds a Master's degree, lives in Charleston, Illinois, and works as a college internship coordinator. She was raised Presbyterian in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies no current religious affiliation.

Anna, age 33, is Caucasian, heterosexual, single with no children, holds a Master's degree, lives in Bend, Oregon, and works as conservationist practitioner. She was raised Quaker in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as "spirituality through yoga/climbing/running."

Nelson, age 34, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with two step-children, a son age 7 and daughter age 9, holds a Master's degree, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as an engineer. She was raised Episcopalian in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as "non-practicing Episcopalian, non-practicing Buddhist."

Kay, age 35, is Caucasian, heterosexual, single with no children, holds a Master's degree, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as high school counselor and hiking guide. She was raised Lutheran in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as "spiritual."

Emily, age 35, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with one 19-month-old son, college-educated, lives in Carbondale, Colorado, and works as a magazine editor. She was raised Anglican in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as nonpracticing Anglican.

Nicole, age 36, is Caucasian, heterosexual, single with no children, college-educated, lives in Lakewood, Colorado, and works as a graduate student and in information technology. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies no current religious affiliation.

Bethany, age 37, is Caucasian, heterosexual, single with no children, college-educated, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as a fine arts student and restaurant server. She was not raised in a religious tradition and identifies her current religion as "naturalist."

Michaela, age 38, is Caucasian, bisexual, in a relationship with no children, holds a Master's degree, lives in Carmel, Indiana, and works as an artist. She was raised Lutheran in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as "atheist."

Madeline, age 39, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with no children, college-educated, lives in Golden, Colorado, and works as a medical assistant. She was raised "with religion" and does not identify a current religion.

Muriel, age 39, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with no children, college-educated, lives in Golden, Colorado, and works as a medical journal editor. She was raised Lutheran, Missouri Synod in the Protestant tradition and identifies Lutheran, Missouri Synod as her current religion.

Aspen, age 40, is Jewish-American, heterosexual, married with one son age 22 months and one daughter age 11, holds a Doctoral degree, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as a university professor. She was raised Jewish and identifies her current religion as “practicing Buddhist approaches.”

Gillian, age 40, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with two sons ages 13 and 15, college-educated with some graduate school, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as environmental education specialist and program coordinator. She was raised Presbyterian in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as “in search of.”

Sheryl, age 41, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with no children, holds a Master’s degree, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as an environmental scientist. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies no current religious affiliation.

Leah, age 41, is Caucasian, heterosexual, single with no children, college-educated with some graduate school, lives in Denver, Colorado, and works as an employment developer and job coach for people with developmental disabilities. She was raised Lutheran in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as Christian with “no church affiliation.”

Frances, age 41, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with one daughter age 16 and one son age 19, college-educated, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as a homemaker. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies her current religion as Roman Catholic.

Renee, age 46, is Swedish-American, heterosexual, married with no children, college-educated, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as designer, educator, and retail buyer. She was raised Lutheran in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as “agnostic.”

Alana, age 48, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with two sons ages 12 and 16, college-educated, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as a group home manager. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies her current religion as “personal, non-organized.”

Melinda, age 50, is Jewish-American, heterosexual, single with one daughter age 21, high-school educated, lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and works as a writer and curriculum developer. She was raised conservative Jewish and identifies her current religion as “nature.”

Eileen, age 51, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with two sons ages 11 and 14, holds a Master’s degree, lives in Bellaire, Texas, and works as homemaker. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies her current religion as Roman Catholic.

Carolina, age 53, is Caucasian, heterosexual, married with three sons ages 20, 24, and 26, high-school educated with professional training, lives in Asheville, North Carolina, and works as a real estate broker. She was raised Roman Catholic and identifies her current religion as Presbyterian in the Protestant Christian tradition.

Marie, age 64, is Norwegian-American, heterosexual, married, with one son age 36 and one daughter 35, holds a Master’s degree, lives in Minnetonka, Minnesota, and is a retired English teacher with significant volunteer commitments. She was raised Lutheran in the Protestant Christian tradition and identifies her current religion as nondenominational Christian.

Contexts of Women’s Transformative Experiences While Distance Running in Nature

Current running practice and past and present relationship to running. The primary reasons the women in this study started running from 3 to 30 years ago were to participate in competitive school track or cross-country or road races, to get physically fit or alter their bodies through weight loss, to cope with life stressors or their related symptoms like headaches, pain, or substance use, and to cope with life changes like the growth of children. Other reasons included

the influences of growing up in a running family, or having an explicit motivation to change her life in a positive way.

In the past, they ran distances ranging from 3 miles to ultramarathons of 50-100 miles at one time, ran 3-6 times per week, and calculated weekly mileages ranging from 10 to significantly higher if training for an event. Often they ran on a treadmill or outdoors on paved roads, sometimes trails, while adhering to a frequently inflexible schedule of daily or regular running or training to accomplish goals of completing road or trail races ranging from the 5K (3.1 miles) to ultramarathons. Not accomplishing goals would sometimes generate stress or self-deprecation, and overtraining for competitive events might contribute to food restriction or injuries. Occasionally they experienced an endorphin rush or found running enjoyable, or decided to take breaks from running for months or years to engage in other activities.

Most of the women reported their present running distance and weekly mileage was similar to that of the past. However, the ways they described approaching and experiencing distance running in nature presently was markedly different. When practiced for spiritual purposes, running became something special, done more often alone, but also with close friends, spouses, or companion dogs. The use of music to motivate became a rarity, as did treadmill running, restricting runs to “good” weather or required schedules, or guilt about not running. In their descriptions of their present relationship with distance running in nature, reasons identified for running included:

- To experience significant meditative effects in solitude or with others, including a quiet mind, body, and heart, an empty mind, the feeling of being aware and fully present in the moment, the enjoyment of being in the moment, being able to focus on the breath, feeling buoyancy, being able to let go and experience the “flow” of life.

- To experience significant therapeutic effects in solitude or with others, including prevention of depression, prevention of need for medication to treat depression, prevention of feelings of emotional and physical pain, management of feelings of anxiety, to “re-set” mentally, to gain perspective on life, to experience a positive outlook on life, to experience feelings and emotions fully, to release emotions.
- To experience retreat, solace, or balance in life.
- To experience their love of running.
- To experience enjoyment of, and connection and identification with, the natural world, including wild and companion animals.
- To build and strengthen relationships, often with female friends, and a sense of community.
- To learn about oneself or engage in self-discovery.
- To connect with oneself in solitude and experience personal authenticity.
- To experience mental benefits of increased clarity, creativity, and problem solving ability.
- To care for the physical body.
- To discover the meaning in their lives.
- Because it is a part of who they are.
- To experience feelings of power, strength, pride, accomplishment, and confidence.
- To experience other pleasurable emotions and sensations, including freedom, rhythmic breathing and movement, and the intense expenditure of energy.
- Because it is magical or otherworldly.
- Because it is “good medicine.”

- Because it provides a structure for a desired way of living in relationship with oneself and nature, or a meaningful “lifestyle.”
- To pray or listen to God.
- To worship God.

The following excerpts illustrate participants’ present relationship with distance running in nature as a spiritual practice.

As it is my physical practice, it is also my spiritual practice, in that the physical experience allows my mind not just to wander, but to loose the restrictive worries and demands of work and life that I am frequently preoccupied with, and come into a more open space or experience of creative ideas and possibilities for my life and how I can and want to shape my experience in the world, near- and long-term. (Anna)

I know that running has not only opened the door to self-awareness in a physical sense of what is happening physiologically to me, but happening mentally. When I run alone, I work to empty my mind, stop the thoughts, and just be. Just move. Just breathe. Just be. When I can reach that Zen state of running, the most common thoughts that burst through that inner stillness are ones of gratitude, of awareness of the nature and the world around me, of my community at large, and how I am connected to it. (Abigail)

There is a balance between a run becoming a journey or a planned for destination, and I believe I am on my way to finding which days are suited best for each of those paths. (Gillian)

Running serves many purposes in my life beyond the obvious function of offering me exercise. It also provides exercise for my most reliable running partner, my dog. And though I love a run with just me and my pup and I also love a run with good friends. Hence, running can be a social activity for me. And with the right friends, a good run can be like a good counseling session; a time to process, reflect, and hear advice. Running also serves to connect me to the natural world. It’s true that I can be seen running streets now and then, but in my heart I am loyal to trail running. Finding myself in the midst of the forest after a day at work sometimes makes me feel like I was transported to another world. Spending time in nature is crucial to my well-being. It’s meditation. It moves my feelings through my body. It’s where I find my power. I know plenty of people who are married to running. Not me. It’s more like I am having an affair with running. One that I believe will last for most of my life. I can miss a run without feeling like I am betraying anyone. I have a gift for lazy, sometimes to my own dismay. I don’t get up at 5 am to run before work. I don’t feel guilty if I miss a day of running. And I never, ever do more than one run a day. (Kay)

In the years since I started running on Sunday mornings on a regular basis, I realized I was in a state of “worship.” Worship is defined in the Bible as “giving glory to God.” In the past, as an American, worship only meant standing with a group of people in a church or a room and singing “worship” songs. And, this is still a form of worship to me. However, I realize that when I am running, I am praying, in a way. I give thanks for being, for feeling my breath move through my body, for my blood running through my veins, etc. I realize that now when I “use” the gifts I was given (two legs that move, lungs that are healthy), I am worshipping. (Leah)

I ran in high school and stopped running after I was raped in 1993. For 3 years I did not run. Then, I began running at the same time I went to rape counseling. Running helped me overcome anxiety about life, brought balance back to my life, and helped me gain confidence in my abilities again. Running has been a necessary and welcome part of life again since 1996. For me, trail running is my connection to life and my quiet time to reflect upon situations, to make decisions, and/or to reach a meditative state of relaxation and peace. (Nicole)

Religious and spiritual history and current religious or spiritual life. The women in this study were most often raised with one or more parents who actively, or sometimes only passively, shaped them in the beliefs, traditions, and practices of Roman Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, or Judaism. Some of those women additionally underwent formal religious schooling between kindergarten and high school. While the levels of religious influence in their childhoods varied, those who no longer identify with the religion of their family of origin described their childhood experience of religion as confusing, boring, foreign, unfair, disconnected with the professed beliefs or morals, strange, or superficial. Those women who remained within their childhood religious tradition spoke affirmatively about it, and those few who were not raised with religion, expressed interest or neutrality toward religion.

When describing their current religious and spiritual lives, whether still affiliated with a religious tradition or having embarked on a personal spiritual path, the qualities women mentioned included:

- Appreciation for different religions and theologies.
- Openness to others and their religions.

- Certainty, uncertainty, or nonconcern about an afterlife.
- Seeking to live ethical principles and values including compassion, respect for others (including nature and animals), kindness, and humaneness.
- Still being influenced, both positively and negatively, by the rhythms, rituals, and theologies of childhood religion even if not involved with it.
- Engaging in spiritual practices in addition to running, including daily meditation or occasional retreats, prayer, yoga, Christian fellowship, worship and Bible study, rock climbing, and being attentive to the natural world.
- Being in, and/or direct connection with, nature or animals.
- Experiencing a connection to or communication with an animal (e.g., hawk).
- Being creative or artistic.
- Being in solitude.
- Losing a sense of time or self.
- Experiencing a nondualistic state of awareness where self and other dissolve.
- Experiencing a state of peace.
- Experiencing sensitivity to life and energy.
- Sharing in belonging and unity with others in community.
- Engaging in religious life with family, spouse, children, and friends.
- Feeling connected to ancestors through spiritual life.
- Being of service to others, including leadership and teaching in religious community.
- Engaging in social change efforts.
- Having a spiritual guide or receiving guidance from a higher power.
- Believing in and/or feeling blessed by a higher power.

- Having a worshipful attitude or being worshipful.
- Belief in a soul or spirit.
- Coming into contact with soul or spirit.
- Having experiences that might be considered psychic, intuitive, or other-worldly.
- Evocation of powerful emotions like wonder, awe, and gratitude.
- Memories of a childhood spent in nature with family and friends.

The following excerpts from responses to this background question convey, descriptively, ways in which many identified qualities are interconnected in their spiritual lives.

It was during my time as a biologist in Sitka, Alaska that I felt a spiritual connection to the world around me. The ravens talked to me, the trees protected me, the river calmed me, the ocean pulled back and revealed barnacles waving, algae squirting, and creatures racing through intertidal pools that became temporary worlds of wonder. The weather became another source of wonder and exhilaration. With the rain, came raging river water and with the wind, came crashing ocean waves. The emotions that were created within me allowed me to search for and find meaning in my life outside of the everyday demands of just being. The feelings that the natural world can bring out in me are like no other, therefore, it is in that space that I have found spirituality; a place to believe anything is possible, everything is connected, and gratitude for the pure existence of life. (Gillian)

I feel that my strongest spiritual connection I have now is with nature and with making art. In nature the beauty of life trumps all the ugliness and it helps give me the strength to be. If I am having a difficult time with something, I am able to go outside and into the woods and come out feeling comforted and faithful and strong. I also have powerful experiences when I make art. I am able to lose my physical self and become part of the act of creation. (Bethany)

The social values of Quakerism “stuck” and largely form my core spiritual beliefs and the beliefs from which I live in the world . . . within each human being there is that “of God” or of “the divine” For many years I felt called to work for social change through education . . . to making the world more livable for all people. My spirituality has always been wildness and I have always personally identified strongly with wildness, with the natural beauty of tangling, uncultivated scapes, and my spirituality still as a more adult person is hardly cultivated. . . . Running carries me through these places and fosters a mental clarity that in a very fundamental way allows me to experience nature more clearly and sharply and intimately . . . requires me to be present, to breathe deeply, to focus on my movement; requires my mind and my body to meet in a way they rarely do otherwise in my life. They are experiences I learn from and from which I draw as

touchstones when I am struggling in my life, and they are experiences which lead me back out to reconnect with a sense of well-being, of peace, and to invigorate myself, to prepare myself to seek more in the world, to go into the world with more hope and bigger ideas and with the training of running, especially, to know that I am capable of meeting challenges, of coping with the challenge I find before me. They are, and running is, to a large extent how I find myself. (Anna)

The following excerpts convey how a childhood in nature may have shaped their spirituality today.

I had found my spirituality early and often in places of nature. Luckily, my father was an avid outdoorsman and my mother was eager to join his adventures with her children in tow. One of my first memories is laying beneath a tree listening to the sound of rushing water. It's not that I saw God in the tree or heard God in the water, at least not the God that the preacher seemed to talk about. But it's that the small wonderments of the natural world connected me directly to the mystery of the Universe. The soaring raptor, the sudden rain, the frogs and bugs that I held in my hand, these are the sorts of things that gave me my spirituality. And to this day, I worship the wonder of the Universe through things natural. I have learned ceremony, prayer, gratitude and love through wild things and places. And, most importantly, I have learned that in my own soul is a wild piece of nature. (Kay)

My family, from my grandparents and down through my mother, have always valued spending time outdoors as a way to connect with each other and the environment and as a way to relax and enjoy life. I grew up camping and hiking several times a year. Being aware of the landscape, the plants and animals on it and the effects of the seasons was presented to me as important by the adults that I loved and trusted most. I think this is why I consider being attentive to the natural world as part of my spiritual practice. (Sheryl)

Throughout my childhood, my parents would alternate Sundays of going to church and of going hiking on Roan Mountain in North Carolina. While I didn't know it then, my spiritual life began on those Sunday family hikes on Roan Mountain. In college, when I started hiking and trail running, I first began to identify a spiritual connection with being in nature. (Nicole)

Prior experiences of abuse, neglect, violence or other significantly traumatic events or loss. Twenty-one women reported having experienced multiple (2 or more) incidences of abuse, neglect, significantly traumatic events or losses in their lifetime, most which occurred during childhood. Two women reported having been impacted by only one event or loss. One experienced sexual exploitation by an adult partner, and the other lost a family member to death

as an adult. The significantly traumatic events or losses identified by women as having impacted their lives included:

- Growing up with an alcoholic parent(s).
- Growing up with a mentally ill parent.
- Growing up with codependent parent.
- Being raised by older siblings due to parental instability in childhood.
- Born to adolescent parent.
- Divorce of parents in childhood.
- Emotional/verbal abuse by parent in childhood.
- Emotional or physical neglect by parent in childhood.
- Physical abuse by parent in childhood.
- Sexual abuse/molestation by parent or family member in childhood.
- Sexual abuse/molestation by a peer in childhood.
- Religious/spiritual abuse by parent in childhood.
- Abandonment by parent during childhood.
- Living in poverty as child.
- Serious injury, surgery, hospitalization resulting from accident as an adolescent.
- Suicidal feelings and/or suicide attempt in adolescence.
- Premature sexual activity in childhood or adolescence.
- Rape as an adolescent or adult.
- Illness and death of parent as a child or adolescent.
- Sexual coercion/abuse in adult intimate relationship.
- Emotional/psychological abuse in adult intimate relationship.

- Physical intimidation/abuse in adult intimate relationship.
- Drug/alcohol abuse in adult intimate relationship.
- Death of intimate partner in accident as an adult.
- Death of family member in accident as an adult.
- Natural death of early attachment figure/family member as an adult.
- Having an abortion as an adult.
- Diagnosis of sexually transmitted disease as an adult.
- Family member arrested for sexual offense as an adult.
- Became aware of abuse or violence toward another nonrelated person as an adult.
- Significant financial loss as adult.
- Being a parent of child who suffered from illness.
- Death of beloved pet as an adult.

The following excerpts illustrate participants' awareness of how traumatic experiences and losses impacted their lives and development.

My mother got breast cancer when I was 10, went through the brutal cancer treatments of the 70s, and died when I was 18. Those events have formed nearly every decision I have made for myself since . . . wasn't going to get married because I'm afraid of loss (I did get married, but I was never looking to meet a life partner . . . it just happened!), not having children because I don't want to leave motherless daughters if I get breast cancer and die young. Traveled the world, because I am only going to live once. My mother's illness and death . . . are very impactful, even to this day. (Renee)

The year I was 15, I was in a car accident on Halloween in which my small intestine was ruptured and one of my vertebra was fractured. I had abdominal surgery to repair the intestine. I was in the hospital for 2 weeks, on morphine and having vivid dreams. My class was studying Dante's *Inferno*, and I remember feeling like I was having my own personal experience of the underworld . . . my experience was one of being on a journey alone, like no one could reach me or really be with me on that journey back to the girl I had been. (Anna)

I had a really rough childhood. When my parents had me my mom was 15 and my father was 54. Originally I was given up for adoption but when I was born they decided they

would keep me. My mother was pretty cruel emotionally . . . I was physically abused as a child by my mother and father. When I was 11 my mother left for good and my father raised us. We grew up very poor with help from state organizations. We moved around a lot because we were on housing. My father . . . was in a constant state of anger when my mother left and apparently I was a reminder of her on a daily basis. . . . When I was 16 I moved out on my own to escape. When I was 13 I attempted suicide but have never felt the urge since. I lost my virginity to the boy across the street when I was 11. (Bethany)

My fiancé . . . died in a mountaineering accident in the Himalaya in 2004, which led to a period of deep spiritual and personal growth Falling in love with, then losing [him] was by far the most defining event of my life to that point. For the best part of a year I dwelled on the loss and felt immense anger for having lost [him] as well as the children and life we were planning together. But travelling, writing and speaking to friends at length about my feelings helped me work through it all, and now I feel much more whole as a person. I know myself better, am confident in my inner strength and am less fearful of taking chances in life. (Emily)

I grew up in an alcoholic family. My father drank and was distant while my mother tried to keep it all together. I did not have a relationship with my parents, my older siblings raised me . . . I did have an abortion at the age of 18, believing I could not be “that daughter” to my parents . . . I sometimes wonder about my aborted baby but also realize I would not have the children I now have if that baby was allowed to be born. (Alana)

Significant Life Events Occurring at the Time of the Transformative Experience

The transformative experiences that women shared had taken place at various times in their lives, some many years ago, as in the case of Frances whose experience occurred when she was 28 and at the time of her participation in the study she was 42, and for others such as Cassie, as recently as this year. Eighteen of the participants reported that they were experiencing one or more significant life events at the time of their transformative experience, and 4 others reported they were not. Those significant life events included:

- Work stress due to a demanding job with a lot of responsibility.
- Loss of a job.
- Financial difficulties.
- Being a first-time parent.
- Being recently married.

- Having an emotional needy spouse.
- Being in an unhealthy intimate relationship.
- Recent ending of an intimate relationship.
- Trying to balance parenting, relationship, and work commitments.
- Changing role as a parent or spouse.
- Changing jobs.
- Completing or being enrolled in a challenging academic program.
- Experiencing a decade transition in age.
- Recent discontinuation of drug use.
- Embedded in unchanging routine.
- Recently ill parent.
- Moving to another state.

The following excerpts convey how multiple significant events intersected in the lives of some women at the time of the transformative experience.

I was a very young mother with two kids and a husband. The first year of our marriage we experienced death, divorce, anorexia, children, and much more in our family. I was hanging on for dear life without any guidance. My husband and I had to start from scratch. (Frances)

I was in the midst of an unhealthy marriage, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, I had a stressful job where I felt unappreciated by my boss, and I felt alone and unconnected to anyone and everything. Everything happening in my life felt larger than it was and I felt like I had no control over anything. (Nicole)

. . . I was very busy with a demanding job at that time. My work was taking up a lot of time and taking me away from people and activities that I loved. I was struggling with how much time I wanted to spend ensuring I was financially secure versus how much time I wanted to spend socializing with people I like and love and having other hobbies. The experience started me down a path, which ended with me deciding that I was willing to be less financially secure in order to spend more time on nonwork things. Even though I liked my job and felt it was good, important work, I didn't want to be consumed by that one thing. I now work part-time and really enjoy it. (Sheryl)

I started to realize that this was a theme throughout my life—I was not a free person. The one area that I was experiencing freedom and success in was running . . . I was still struggling with getting a job I enjoyed . . . I gave up my art and design and became known to new friends just as a runner. . . . I started allowing myself to be freer. I dated more than one man at a time, allowed myself to drink more often, go to and hang out at bars for the first time in my life. I started understanding how much I valued others' opinions in order to give me self-esteem, and then I started to understand that I didn't need to care anymore. (Leah)

The following words and phrases convey the emotional states and conditions that accompanied the significant life events:

- Worry.
- Fear.
- Conflicting emotions, like excitement and sadness.
- Feeling a lack of control.
- Feeling alone.
- Feeling disconnected from others.
- Lacking a source of guidance.
- Inner struggle.
- Uncertainty.
- Monotony.
- Overwhelm.
- Intensity.
- Stress.
- Energy diverted toward others.
- In need of something for self.
- Lack of consistency.

- Lack of normal routine.
- Difficult.

Women's Transformative Experiences While Distance Running in Nature

During the second step of data collection, each woman was provided with a meditation to guide her through the process of using embodied writing to describe a transformative experience that occurred while she was distance running in nature. Embodied writing invites the writer to convey experience from the perspective of the body through rich, detailed descriptions of sensations and emotions. This section contains excerpts from those writings, focusing on content used during the reflective processes of Cycle 4 and 5. Complete embodied writings are located in Appendix D.

Cassie. The following excerpts from her embodied writing describe the experience that heightened Cassie's "awareness of the mind-body connection" and confirmed for her "that hope and faith are a vital part of keeping life in the right prospective.

. . . The air is still, no wind this morning. The faint scent of rain fills my nostrils as I breathe in and out. I look to the northeast to catch a glimpse of the majestic San Francisco Peaks and see dark clouds looming in the distance The air becomes damp and cool and heightens my awareness of the sweet smell of the surrounding Ponderosa Pines. The gravel under my feet crunches and with each step I become more awake and more content to be out in the solitude of this morning. As I continue on, my thoughts take me away from my present surroundings to views of the future. . . . Suddenly, as if Mother Nature knew I was in turmoil and needed calming, a light, steady rain began to fall. With the rain came more cleansing oxygen in the air and as I breathed deeper, a feeling of peace floated over me. I came back to the present and saw the dirt jump as the raindrops hit the trail. I looked up to see that south of the black rain clouds, the sun was poking up over the horizon . . . a vibrant double rainbow appeared in the western sky. A mixture of rain, sweat, and tears streamed down my face as I looked to the heavens and smiled. A sense of tranquility settled into my body. It was as though an enormous weight had been lifted and I was no longer running, but flying . . . I was exactly where I was supposed to be in the world.

Kelly. During her transformative experience, Kelly felt, for the first time in her life, "complete peace, contentment, and fulfillment for an extended amount of time," during a

moment of spiritual connection with God. The following excerpts from her embodied writing also convey her enjoyment of what she calls “the simplicity of running.”

. . . As I began running, my mind immediately went into positive mode. I felt extremely thankful for the sliver of sunshine, my burst of energy, and the feelings of conquering a challenge set before me. My legs felt strong. My lungs were clear . . . As I passed the small cemetery on my left, indicating my four-mile mark, the clouds seemed to part and the sun took over the entire sky . . . I immediately thanked God for the precious gift of sunshine as I ran. I thanked Him for allowing me to be alive, and the ability to run and “reset” my life every time I did so. At this moment, I peered to my left across snow covered open fields. I began to notice nature and the environment that surrounded me. I noticed the tree lines that divided the seemingly unending cornfields. I noticed a couple of birds flying above me. The most beautiful sight was the acres of open land covered with bright, white snow reflecting the sunlight causing me to squint from the glare. I took out my ear buds. The sounds were beautiful. I heard the soles of my shoes contacting the pavement. I heard the two birds chirping. I heard the wind pick-up and die down. This felt like God’s music. To my amazement, I realized I was finding the beauty in the raw, natural state of this Earth. In that moment, my heart was overflowing with joy, peacefulness, and a thankfulness that God would allow little ol’ me a sliver of access to, maybe, understanding His view of His creation. I continued on my journey feeling light as a feather . . . I thanked God for every person who shaped my life, for the life I still have to live, and for the indescribable gratitude I was feeling toward Him. I finished my run without noticing the cold temperatures, or the aches and pains in my shins that usually arise around mile eight. I also finished my run without my iPod in my ears, but I wasn’t without music; I had God’s music in my ears.

Abigail. The following excerpts from Abigail’s embodied writing reflect an experience of listening to and trusting in both her body and a female friend sharing the run with her.

. . . I turned and smiled at the girl who was matching me step for step and we just grinned at each other. Feeling connected, feeling proud of our selves, and enjoying the run . . . was grateful for the girl at my side whose friendship and presence was motivation to lean into myself and trust that I could. . . The run was not happening to me, but I was choosing this experience . . . One hill down, one to go. I remember we smiled at each other as we reached the top. There was no easy conversation at this point, we both knew we had no recovery time, and the only sound was our heavy breathing, the birds signing and chirping, and our feet hitting the pavement in a steady, strong rhythm. . . We were flying through the miles, running faster than I would have thought prior I was capable of, and rather than questioning my ability to maintain, I trusted myself and enjoyed the run. I stopped the doubting chatter in my head. I ran. And was grateful. For what my body was showing me it was capable of. For the girl next to me who was willing to sweat and chat while offering friendship and support for a 12+ mile run at the end of a long week, for the beautiful sights we were able to take in while out on a country road . . . I turned to the girl who was matching me step for step and we just grinned at each other. I felt like we were

flying . . . I tucked my head and ran. There was no inner negativity, no questioning my ability, just pure joy in the moment, my body, my inner power, and a feeling that I was connected to myself in a way I only experience when I run. I was connected to the girl running next to me, and to our greater community, and to the physical world in which we belong. I was learning to trust my self and my body that I do have it within my self, and I can. We crested the last hill, still at a pace that felt Olympian-like in its speed, and I said in between gasps of air, “We are freaking rock stars. We are amazing, powerful, kick ass women.” She grinned at me, and I knew she felt it too.

Anna. The transformative experience that Anna described using embodied writing was of her “first, first-hand experience of that sense of interconnectedness,” a sense that she conveyed as “abundance” and as “flowing,” as in “currents” and “doors opening.” Being able to repeatedly “plug in” to this sense has contributed to feeling resilient and “at ease in the world and more comfortable in my skin.” Excerpts from her writing follow.

. . . These are the warm-up legs, the flat expanse of mesa descending to rolling dirt trails under ponderosas. I go easy: arms loose, shoulders back, finding the rhythm of my breath to match my stride. The trail climbs gently, angling across the foot of the mountain . . . I keep it slow, breath even, mindful of the climb in the next four miles. Which is not to say I do not struggle: on the steep sections I take tiny baby steps, legs leaden, lungs searing, the first waves of fatigue washing lightly past my eyes, down into the space between my shoulder blades. . . . Gratitude floods my body one deep exhalation after another. I let gravity and the trail carry me, leading my feet, resting as I wind through pines along the edge of the park. . . . The palette of the landscape has changed. The forest is somber, quiet, waiting . . . I run in the company of trees and of certain friends. Particular experiences we have shared propel me in this moment, add to the momentum of this moment . . . these friends are with me as I run, so much so that I make a note to write them later to let them know how they are with me. . . . Running down the mountain I feel how I have been shaped by my childhood home, a kingdom of amber woods and wandering creek, the constant, loving, selfless gift of my parents. It is a mandala, the root of my being, Ariadne’s watery thread by which I am found in my life, here on this mountainside, 16 miles in. I run exhilarated, steeped in a keen sense of grace, of everything unfolding perfectly, of having been so kindly and gently and firmly wrought by so many interactions into this person who I am who I love and am so grateful to be running down the mountain; this human loving running being.

Nelson. In August 2010, Nelson participated in the TransRockies RUN 3, a 3-day solo run in the Rocky Mountains, totaling 58.4 miles and 8,600 feet of elevation gain. In the

following excerpts from her embodied writing, she contrasted 2 days of running in the event which was transformative as a whole for her.

Day 1: This is going to be a bad day I can tell already . . . I start running pretty well . . . I have positive thoughts . . . an older man asks me where my partner is. I explain why I don't have a partner and he asks why everyone is running so fast? This is the first notion I have that I am blowing it . . . stomach is a mess . . . I am really confused and hot . . . I feel the bottom of my edge. . . . The next 5 miles are hard and I reach a new low . . . I listen to my body . . . I feel like crap. I can't wait to see the finish. My stomach is cramping now. I don't remember the last several miles. I don't remember if I went uphill or downhill, I am so hot. The sun is so bright. The ground reflects some of the heat and I think the ground is against me. . . . I start focusing on my feet and making good decisions on my feet . . . I focus on breathing . . . I focus on running . . . I'm confused again. . . . I watch out for animals . . . where are all the animals?? I usually see a bunch while I am running . . . I must not be being very present . . . I see my friend! I am gonna cry . . . I am grateful. At this moment I love her The ground is less loose. I love the ground . . . are we getting close to the end?? I strain my eyes and look ahead, there's something black at the top of the hill . . . is that the finish?? Can I hear it?? Oh I would be so happy if that's the end . . . after another ½ hour I make it to the finish.

Day 2: Today is a climb over a mountain . . . I am excited . . . I start running at a good clip. The ground is rough . . . I can hear the ground talking to me . . . I push faster . . . I know today will be a good day . . . my stomach is great, I am warm, I have good water with me . . . I am passed by a few men . . . we all seem hopeful and are enjoying the gorgeous views already even though we can't see much yet . . . breathing is too rhythmic and necessary to waste on words The rhythm of the climb is stuck with me now, left, right, breathe with the right, push with the left . . . I see my friend . . . we instantly glom together . . . we are content and happy. I feel strong and capable and am enjoying myself. The top is near and I am attached to this day. I am attached to this view . . . I am glowing . . . I reach the top . . . I turn and fly. I love downhill sections and over the years have improved the art of letting go, landing with light quick footsteps that react on a moment's notice to avoid falls. . . . My feet are flying . . . I feel as if the ground is guiding my feet where to go, the ground is my number 1 fan today, helping me to reach my goals and have a successful day. . . . I am warm, my stomach is fine, my body is fine, I don't need anything . . . I am invincible. . . . Further down the mountain and I'm in the trees . . . I am breathing heavy and very focused. My arms are swinging wildly as I keep my balance . . . I am determined. I set a new rhythm on this flatter, packed single track . . . I'm just a few miles away now and fading a bit . . . focus on keeping positive thoughts and start looking at the scenery again. . . . I cross the finish line and don't recognize anyone. No one cares how well I have done. I'm a little deflated. But am so excited personally and feel great. I grab some food, sit down, and enjoy the hard won day.

During this “physically and mentally difficult” 3-day mountain run, Nelson “reached a new level of low and high.” She explained that the experience “deepened my awareness of

human capability, my personal capability by pushing past previous limits . . . mostly mental and indeed not physical.” As a result of the experience, she was “more motivated to clean up ‘old messes’” and felt a “reunion with my original self, suggesting that, ‘Perhaps accessing your past pain leads to an opening in the spiritual realm and an allowance of what is (right then, not a mental projection).’” She also wrote, “It did feel like we were all animals migrating to some other winter location during the race.”

Kay. The following excerpts from her embodied writing describe Kay’s experience of using a mantra while running to confront and transform fear.

. . . one beautiful day in the forest; I was running one of my favorite trails on a day full of cool air and sunshine. It was the kind of day that has the tendency to light a brightness at the center of my chest that feels like it dances into the air around me. But my body wasn’t responding in its usual way to the beauty around me. Instead it was heavy and slow and asked me to stop running. I didn’t oblige. Instead I asked why it wanted me to stop. And it told me that the weight of my fear based mantra was too heavy; too heavy to run with, too heavy to see the sunshine through. Then and there, on my favorite trail on my favorite kind of Northern Arizona day, I decided to change the mantra. . . . I chose this mantra instead; I will find a great job in Flagstaff. I repeated it with every step. When my mind wandered, I directed it gently back to my newly chosen mantra. Immediately my body loosened up. I started feeling my breath again. And when I got home I noticed that my stomach did not hurt . . . I had been home from that run for minutes before my phone rang. It was a former colleague from another city. She had a friend who was looking for a counselor at an agency she was managing in Flagstaff. Was I interested? Yes, indeed, I was . . . using a mantra when I run helped to heal my body and bring me peace, no doubt.

During this experience, Kay “learned that I was capable of using the time . . . to exercise my energetic influence in the world.” She recognized, “I have power through mantra, a power that I had not previously explored before this experience.” Using this sacred power while running, Kay becomes “a highly charged energetic force” that can effect both her interactions with the world and “the way that the world interacts with me,” addressing “many spiritual and emotional problems” in the process.

Emily. The following excerpts from the embodied writing of Emily convey a transformative experience that restored vitality lost after the death of her future husband.

. . . I just started running. The sudden, rhythmic impact shocked my stiff joints and pounded my tense muscles. I carried my tight shoulders up around my ears and clenched my hands into fists I was a plodding hunchback, loudly inhaling and exhaling the near-freezing air as my feet slapped the frozen-dirt trail. I ignored the searing pain shooting through my shins. After 20 minutes, my muscles began to remember how to flex and lengthen with each stride. I stood up a bit straighter and shook out my hands. I took a deep breath and released my shoulders. I've missed how running makes me feel, I thought, and managed a little smile. I turned up a hill and pumped my arms faster to propel me up the gentle grade and along the trail marking the edge of town and start of the wilderness. The sharp scent of pine trees perked me up. My under-used ankles and knees creaked from the work of pushing against gravity and my heart pounded. I actually felt . . . great. Though I had lost weight, a heavy lump in my gut had been weighing me down for months. It occurred to me that the lump was stagnated life force, or qi, as it's called in Chinese medicine. And as my blood pumped, heart pounded and lungs expanded, the lethargy-inducing lump was lightening. For the first time since Ben's death, I was aware of my environment, and relished the cold air on my face, the forest's earthy smell and the crunching of frost under my feet. As my muscles recalled running's familiar rhythm, I found a natural pace that reminded me of the athlete—and the woman—I had been before grief got a hold of me. Then I knew that running had the power to bring me back to life.

Nicole. After Nicole encountered a fox while running, as described in the embodied writing excerpts below, she felt empowered

to stand up against my husband and charge an airline ticket to my credit card in order to go home and be with mother during surgery, to later start counseling and to file for a divorce, to apply for and accept a better paying job . . . to understand that I am always connected to something greater than myself.

. . . My mind becomes empty as I enter a trance-like repetition. I no longer hear my footsteps on the ground and I become one with the wind gently moving between Aspens and Pines and over rocks and roots. Movement in the corner of my left eye catches my attention. A fox, coat red and thick, short legs painted black, and tail tucked between his legs looks at me. I freeze in place and only my chest moves up and down. I try to quiet my breath by forcing the air through my nose. His brown eyes, outlined in black, are inquisitive and he holds my gaze as we stare at each other quietly. His chest is full and white against his auburn-red body. The bare branches above us scrape against each other in the wind, but we don't move. The wind blows my hair loose again and it slides across my face, but I don't dare touch it. His ears and nose twitch. I wonder if he smells me. "Hello." I whisper. A moment passes and his tail relaxes and drops to the ground behind him revealing interwoven colors of red and black tipped in white. Perspiration rolls down

my forehead and I wipe it with my sleeve and return the loose hair behind my ear. We communicate without sound and I feel that we both understand that we will not harm each other. My breath is calm now and I shift my weight from thigh to thigh. The fox strolls a few feet away from me, his body moving effortlessly; he sits in a sunny spot and circles his tail around his legs. He takes one last look at me bidding me farewell, and lies down in the sun, curls his tail around his body like a blanket and tucks his head into it. He blends into his surroundings. I share another moment basking in the warmth of the sun and in the energy of our kindred spirits. “Have a nice day,” I say feeling exhilarated and connected to everything around me. My senses are heightened and my energy is strong. The forest colors are vibrant greens and browns set against a deep blue backdrop. I hear water moving in the distance and feel the wind blowing through the trees. I know that I am part of something larger than myself and I feel a goodness that I didn’t feel earlier. I am the water, the wind, the earth, and the fox. I continue up the trail without effort and energy runs through every fiber of my muscles propelling my legs forward and easing my breathing. I move back into a meditative state free of worries and completely engulfed in the moment.

Reflecting on this “magical” experience of connection with a wild animal in the mountains of Colorado, Nicole wrote: “I felt like we communicated perhaps through our energy and that we both felt a mutual connection.”

Bethany. In the following embodied writing excerpts, Bethany describes running 10 miles through the Hopi Reservation in northern Arizona as part of a three-member team completing the 30-mile Water Is Life relay.

. . . it is very stark . . . and it is hard to shake the loneliness. . . . The sun is coming up and the first batch of runners is off. I feel that overwhelming sense of melancholy that only a sunrise in the desert can invoke. . . . They look like a beautiful drifting cloud as they run together over the road and into the distance. I get that complicated and overwhelming feeling that I love when I have the rare experience to see horses running. . . . I hug into my core, the place I know I can tap into when I am tired. My legs are powerful and I look down at amazement that something that belongs to me can feel so strong and so complete. There is no effort and I feel so alive. Grace is present. I adopt my little lope, a light springy step with easy breath, I have to pace myself, slow my breathing even though my spirit is chomping at the bit. I am strong, I am relaxed and I am present, I am in this moment like there is no other moment to be had. I am eager to see where I will go. I settle in. Shortly, though, I am called to attention by an electric bolt of energy that is a rattlesnake lying on the trail sunning him self. Instinctively I jump over him and his presence excites me. . . . With every step my body ebbs and flows with my surroundings; my reality, the one that I know exists melts away and my body melts into the realm of action and knowing. . . . I am on top of the mesa and it literally feels like the top of the world. . . . I focus on being present because I don’t want to drift this experience away I

want to hold it close and dear. . . . I am sweating and the dry desert drinks it away. I am cleansing myself; I am healing myself a little more. . . . I run and there is magic in every step. My body honors me and I am thankful for its strength, for its wisdom, and its ability to heal itself, I also feel the love it shows me by giving me the ability to participate in this endeavor. I realize as I run across the mesa that my body is the catalyst for my mind and the soul. . . . I am getting tired as I run these last few miles. I feel that my core is drained away, it feels watery and not at all solid anymore, and my limbs feel hollow like they are filled with air. I search within myself to find the shards of strength I know exist . . . I am with my body now, comforting it, coaxing as I make it this last mile.

Bethany described herself as “a blooming desert lily” during this experience, a flower that could “still can sink into the beauty of the land” to “feel a connectedness with nature and with my body.”

Michaela. In the following excerpts from her embodied writing, Michaela describes encountering a noisy elk while running alone in the forest.

. . . The silence was extreme . . . the harder I ran or the higher I jumped, the more amplified the sounds my body created. . . . I was the only living being on this trail As I approached my turnaround, I was occupied with the sights and sounds of my inhales and exhales, my occasional thoughts, and my vacillating body temperatures . . . a chill ran through me . . . I shivered . . . this chill was caused by a loud, moaning roar followed by an unfamiliar scraping or scratching sound that seemed to echo and never stop. A shudder ran through my body and it seemed like everything around me became fuzzy. I stood silently in the clearing gazing at a brownish-black blur as it emanated its cacophony while writhing and jerking near a tree. I felt the earth jolt beneath my feet, causing my knees to buckle and my brain to simultaneously process the sights and sounds that were surrounding me. The earth felt like it had moved beneath me, knocking me off balance, ever so slightly. However, everything in that moment became crystal clear. The once blurry mass of earth tones before me became the image of an impressive male elk, gnashing its massive antlers against a tree. As I regained my balance, I had the sensation that I was miniscule . . . like I was one inch tall. . . . I felt a sense of unimportance . . . up until that moment of my run, I had seen these trails as “mine” and that I had been “the apex” of this forest. Suddenly, “I” did not seem so important. I had a sense of total immersion and the bigness I had been feeling up until that point had shifted. I was merely a speck in these woods and sort of blindly barreled through these trails, focusing on my breath and my red, swollen skin and how cold I was . . . I felt so careless in my treatment of that trail even just on that day. It was not my forest and my red clay . . . I felt this amazing shift from “I” to “we” (i.e., the universe) . . . I gained a heightened sense of awareness of the reciprocity and “presence” of the beauty and energy of nature . . . a sudden connectedness with the world around me. I then started to worry that I might have startled that great elk. Had I affected him with my presence? Did he even notice me? Did

I interfere with the flow of nature by watching him? What was he doing, anyway?
Attracting a mate?

The following excerpts from Michaela's reflections on her experience convey the shifts in her ego identity that resulted from the encounter.

. . . I had heard the moaning of the elk a few days prior and told someone I thought it was a bear. He told me it was an elk. My narcissistic "burly" runner girl persona was actually disappointed . . . when I saw that elk . . . I was humbled.

. . . when you throw a stone in a river, you change the direction of the rapids. . . . If that elk saw me then it is possible I changed the direction of his rapids. He certainly changed the direction of mine.

Madeline. The following excerpts from the experience described by Madeline focus on her special connection with her dog while running in the mountains of Colorado.

. . . As we started out there were so many people, I just wanted to get by them as quickly as possible. . . . Brody, my Cattle dog, the best running partner I have ever had, was so happy to be there he just wanted to run and discover all of the scents of nature. As we finally escaped most of the people, I was able to get into a great running rhythm, which was a must for the steep climb we had ahead of us, but worth the sun beating down on us, sending Brody sprinting to every snow bank, to eat a few bites of snow then a roll or two, making me smile. Seeing how cute he looks and how free he feels, I begin to feel free as well and forget about the climb. . . . The forest opens up and Brody is off running through it as if I am not in existence. . . . Knowing that I let him be, he sprints past me down a hill right into a slow moving creek for a drink. I take one too

Muriel. In the following excerpts from her embodied writing, Muriel described "an experience that made me feel especially close to someone I care about."

. . . The run starts like a hundred others: Right turn at the end of the driveway and through the neighborhood to the trailhead. We catch up on the trivial matters that affected us, and our families, during the days since we last talked and enjoy the feeling of the cold air entering our lungs and forming soft curls as we exhale. . . . We remark that anyone who is still in bed is missing this beautiful morning. The conversation continues easily—a topic here, a new topic there. Suddenly I realize my dear friend is crying. I ask her to stop and I wrap my arms around her. I feel her small, strong body take in and release some deep breaths. We release each other and talk—for just a moment more—about the subject that made her upset. Then we continue on our way across the trail. I keep my eyes on the rocks in the path ahead hoping I've said the right thing to let her know she's supported and feeling glad that our run is a safe place where friends can let emotions bubble to the

surface. I tuck this experience away in the place in my heart where I store what I know about this friend. This is part of our connection now and I love it.

Reflecting on this experience helped Muriel recognize her grateful feelings for a friendship deepened by running together, and that “time spent with friends running is integral to many of my relationships.”

Aspen. With the recent birth of a baby, Aspen had been doing more walking than running. Excerpts from her embodied writing conveyed the essence of ongoing transformation of consciousness for her, at a slower pace, with her infant son.

. . . I keep a good pace at first as the movement lulls him to sleep. . . . For a few moments I stay with my breath, observing the rise and fall of my abdomen with every step taken. I begin to consciously shift my awareness, leaving the thoughts of the day to tumble along in my mind, while observing the presence that animates each breath that I take, each step that I take. . . . I sense my “I-ness” as more than this body and yet I am fully connected with my body. There is both a sense of expansion and a sense of the very minute. I feel my feet as they move: heel touching dirt, arch extending, toes now down. Then the next foot moves The awareness becomes more specific and now I feel the very pulse of life moving through my limbs. I feel the inner vibration/vibrancy—the life force surging through my arms, my torso, my legs, my feet, my heart, my nose, my ears. . . . Wherever I place my attention, I feel this vibrancy pulsing, moving, ever-changing. Sometimes it feels like I’m experiencing this at a cellular level and I stay with this moving, vibrating, surging sensation, but soon something else captures my attention and I’m suddenly catapulted out of the “now”—the power and vibrancy of this moment. I’m lost in thoughts—mostly mundane. . . . A raven squawks. It has a message for me. “Wake up.” My eyes open wider and wider . . . the sun is feeding me now and there’s no looking away. We dance together and it’s singing its song of wonder while nourishing me on levels I don’t try to understand. We commune like this for a while. Time stretches out and I don’t know how long we’ve been dancing together, but I see that I’ve made the turn that will bring us back home. . . . This forest is alive and aliveness pulses through this human body walking with the forest—I’m the part of the forest feeling itself in this way. And I stay with this feeling as it moves through my being. My heart feels like it’s swelling and my senses are so alive. The smells are now more intense than I remember at the start of my walk and everything is so incredibly colorful. . . . It’s hard to leave this space.

Aspen’s reflections on her experience(s) described her desire to be fully listening and present in each moment, “with whatever is best within me,” while open and receptive like a

“magical cup.” She used the image of a river to convey movement into this state of presence, which allows her to become “gentler, kinder, compassionate, and easier going:”

It’s like at first I’m drifting in a large river (ordinary consciousness), but then I remember that I can sit on a ledge for moment and take a break (presence). While sitting on the ledge, I see the river passing by (it never stops, thoughts never stop), but I am present with the river and not carried away by it.

Gillian. The opening sentence of Gillian’s embodied writing account of running in the Alaska rainforest conveys “feeling a sense of belonging and being part of something larger” that is reflected in the following excerpts.

. . . The wind pushing through 100-foot Sitka Spruce and Hemlocks created a sound that forced itself through the pattering of rain on my hooded raincoat, while the velocity of the water built pressure in the river, creating a rushing sound of urgency. It became nature’s concert of rhythms that exhilarated me into a moment where every sense was a heightened awareness of how euphoric I felt to be part of this natural world. . . . Running with the wind and the sounds of the storm . . . I was the storm and like the wind flowed through the trees, keeping up with the rush of the water. Stopping to catch my breath, I listened as the rain and my breath slowed in harmony . . . there was a raven caught up in the excitement with me. She seemed to have been chasing me and as I stopped chattered at me as ravens often do. We cocked our heads at each other as if asking to continue. The storm was calming, as did our pace down the path. She followed me to where the trail crossed under a road and into the more urban part of the park. I am guessing she returned upstream, where the winds create a playground in the forest. I continued my trip to the estuary, which was flooded with the incoming tide.

Writing about the meaning of the experience in the following excerpts, Gillian explained in detail how it shifted her focus from meeting the needs of her family to developing a mutual relationship with nature that included recognizing personal and wider human moral obligations to nature.

I needed nature to find something outside of my connection with family. My connection with the natural world was unreal and spiritual, an escape from the reality of obligation. Nature allowed me to just be me and not expect anything from me at the time . . . there is more obligation toward this newfound relationship. I have become aware that many of the conveniences in life are detrimental to nature. Where my time and energy was completely focused on my family, I now have more time to analyze human interactions with nature. Running is a consistent reminder of the importance and beauty of all that we

have in this world, the need for more people to connect with nature, and eventually seek out action that will limit our impact.

The evolution of symbiosis between humans and nature is enhanced by an experience like the one I describe. A common example of a symbiotic relationship is that of the clownfish and the sea anemone, where the clownfish is safe from predators and able to scare off the butterfly fish, which will eat a sea anemone. As we make connections with nature, we are more likely to protect our relationship with the natural world. Nature provides numerous amounts of resources for humans, if only we could focus on the ways to harvest those resources in a mutualistic way. It will take attention to detail, gratitude, and compassion to evolve toward a more symbiotic relationship, as opposed to a parasitic relationship. Running in nature is a path toward that future.

Sheryl. In the following embodied writing excerpts about her transformative experience, Sheryl described being “connected to the physical world on many levels, from the smaller, breath-by-breath details to the feeling of being, and belonging, on a planet spinning in space and many levels in between.”

. . . I reach the trailhead and pass beneath the ponderosa pine bough that shades the trail just past the fence. It’s just low enough, and I’m just tall enough As I run beneath the bough, I draw myself up as straight as possible to let the pine’s needles brush the top of my hat. It’s always here and with this motion that I leave the road and enter the forest, both physically and mentally. This trail is an old friend, the route on which I started running regularly about 10 years ago. It has changed over the years, as have I The flicker calls out with its half whistle, half screech. Western bluebirds swoop and flutter from pine to pine, their bright blue bodies and rusty breasts familiar and beloved since I was a child, visiting my grandparents in Colorado from the Maryland suburb where I grew up. Memories from childhood mix with those I’ve made on this very trail. But here is the trail. As I get deeper into the forest, it demands more of my attention. . . . The beauty of it, the knowledge that I, too, am immersed in this glorious golden light fills me with energy and I just want to run and run, to breathe in this beautiful air, to feel my body’s heat radiating away and feel the cool touch of the air brushing my cheeks. . . . I imagine myself as water, flowing, pulled by gravity’s undeniable force down the trail, over and around the rocks. All of my attention is focused on the trail, my eyes dart all over the ground before me, looking for the best route. My breath comes hard, but the cool air is like pure energy entering my lungs to infuse every muscle. . . . I’m aware of the earth beneath my feet turning at a rate I can see and feel as the light fades from the world. It is an amazing thing, that this planet, my planet, so huge I can hardly imagine its size, is spinning in the empty space of an immensely larger universe and I can feel the rate of its turning. . . . I turn back in the dark and return to that pine bough over the trail just beyond the fence to complete my ritual. Standing on tiptoe, I touch my head to the needles. A clump of snow slides off and I get a collar full of freezing flakes. I laugh. So, the world can also play!

Reflecting upon how the experience affected her, Sheryl wrote:

The experience expanded my awareness of my physical presence within the local environment and within the universe. It made me feel part of something much bigger than myself, part of something that is in fact infinite. I felt connected to everything through the space, time, matter, and energy we all share.

Leah. In the following embodied writing excerpts, Leah described an experience in which weather and inner struggle together evoked a “complete physical and spiritual climax” for her, one that resulted in “a physically visible step in healing and letting go” and the feeling of being set free. An additional result was the realization that answers often come from listening to her own heart.

. . . As I ran the first 1/4 mile from the parking lot to the trailhead my head started to clear, and the rain practically stopped. . . . I started to breathe deeply. I tried to keep the focus on my feet placement, watching the wet rocks and the mud. My mind began to settle immediately. No matter how hard I tried to avoid it, I kept hyperventilating. I tried to slow my breathing, but ended up just choking back a sob. Not sure why I was on the verge of tears, I tried to focus on my jumbled week . . . I hate failing. . . . God, I cried, I hate being so vulnerable . . . God had my attention. As the mist of the clouds surrounded me and encased me, I could only see as far as the hillside on the other side of the creek. My normal view . . . was completely obscured by the clouds. The brightness of being in a cloud, but not having direct sunlight was blinding. . . . As I rounded another Eastern switch back, I broke through the clouds, and all I could see was the unearth-like view of the smooth, wave-like clouds at my feet. . . . It was breathtaking. . . . Beautiful . . . I was bathed in sunlight. It was so bright. My mind was filled with the song that is taken from Isaiah 6:1: “I see the Lord” . . . and “I see the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe, filling the temple with His glory” . . . the same part of the song kept going through my head as my eyes welled up and I finally cried as I heard God say to me, “no eye has seen the Glory of the Lord, Leah. But My Glory is like this; and you were here in this valley, in this small place to witness a small bit of my beauty. You are important to me, no matter if you fail or not.”

Frances. Thirteen years prior to participating in this study, Frances completed a 44-mile, 16.5-hour rim-to-rim-to-rim run through the Grand Canyon with a group of trusted female friends. The following excerpts from her embodied writing about the experience describe

pushing herself beyond her known physical and mental limits, facing significant doubt and fear, and coming to know she could survive any challenge life presented in the future.

. . . I was extremely nervous, not quite sure what to expect but I knew if I put one foot in front of the other I could do it. I still felt doubt as we took our first steps into the dark abyss. The only light we could see as we ventured toward our first destination was the light from the north rim and from the full moon. . . . The downhill was slower than we had anticipated. . . . I thought deeply about my young children snuggled in their beds all warm and cozy. Why am I out here in the middle of the night scrambling around in the canyon? This is a question I have asked myself and been asked by others. The answer is simple: there is no better feeling than pushing your body to pure exhaustion. The mind and the spirit are really in control. The minute I start to doubt my body it starts to give into my doubts and I feel every single ache and pain in my body. My spirit is truly what leads my physical self. The body is just a vessel in which my soul uses to reach its desires As the sun began to make its way into the depths of the canyon walls I began to mentally tire. I made it out to the north side but I am not quite sure how. My legs ached and cramped. . . . My eyes and heart were full of emotion and great doubt that I might not make it back. I still had 22 miles left As the food began to enter into my blood stream my mind became clear and I regained the ability to think. . . . My girlfriends and I felt like new women and we felt like horses headed for home. The weather had turned from windy to slight rain but now the sky was slightly overcast with perfect temps to run . . . we came upon a Park Ranger . . . we may have been the last people to see a hiker alive. . . . I felt . . . stunned, worried, sad, invigorated, cautious . . . we had to retrace our steps and run over the spot where the dead man had laid on the trail just hours earlier. . . . I felt . . . gratitude to be alive . . . I truly felt . . . insignificant in this place called the Grand Canyon. . . . I clung to the presence of my God and the friends that ran along side me . . . we finally reached Phantom Ranch. . . . As we pushed forward one foot in front of the other the skies began to change . . . the most glorious big horned sheep stood up on this huge point looking down at us. I felt the power of God in that moment. My clothes were wet with perspiration, my feet ached. I couldn't even tell the color of my shoes anymore, they were the color of the red earth . . . in that moment when the sheep stood before us I felt joy. Joy like no other. I knew then that in my small world there was a higher power that gave me a feeling of hope, peace, and love. . . . As we began our last five miles to the top, a huge absolutely freezing storm came over us. . . . I couldn't feel anything. My hands were ice. They became so cold that they ached with agonizing pain. . . . Every single step took effort. My mind started to waiver and I started to weave. It took every ounce of effort for every single step to the very last one. Once we reached the top the entire area was covered in frozen ice. . . . I started to cry. . . . Once we climbed into our pick-up we turned the heat on as hot as it would go and relished in the glory of being warm.

Frances concluded her writing with the following transformative image:

I was 28 when I ran the canyon and now I am 42 years old. I truly feel like I have transformed. Perhaps like a butterfly. I was a young pupa and now am a wonderful butterfly with wings.

Renee. The transformative experience of Renee occurred while she visiting family in North Dakota and feeling emotionally conflicted about her lack of “common ground” with them. The following excerpts from her embodied writing reflect her movement toward a sense of belonging.

. . . I step out of the farmhouse, and I’m hit with the sharpness of the North. . . My breath is taken away from me, but I feel exhilarated. My strides quickly begin to warm me, but the landscape is so incredibly cold. The sky is flat low and grey, the earth and its black fertile soil with rows of bright green young winter wheat, passes into my field of view with a steady rhythm. I can see so far! The flat straight gravel road I am on stretches on and on to a horizon that never ends. It loudly crunches below me with my every step as it is covered with a thin layer of hoarfrost. I have absolutely no idea which direction I am going because there is no indication of sunrise, or sunset, north or south. . . The landscape is pierced with rows of skeletal popular trees that are planted to act as wind blocks to prevent soil erosion . . . I come to the intersection . . . I have no idea how far away that bunch of trees is. The flatness of everything plays tricks with my normal sense of scale. My only indication is the regularity of the road intersections and the rows of poplars. . . This landscape and these people are part of me, part of the fiber that makes me who I am, no matter how differently I live now, and how my views have evolved, this is where I started. . . Later on that day, we visit the site of my dad’s first schoolhouse . . . my father begins to tell us stories from deep in his memory of his early days. Stories we have never heard before. I belong.

Renee used the image of a tree to convey the meaning of her experience.

There was a reaffirmation of who I am and where I came from. I think that by knowing my roots, I am a stronger tree. I can be more confident of where I am going by seeing where I’ve been.

Alana. While training for a marathon, Alana had a transformative experience that brought her and her dog into direct contact with bald eagles described in the following excerpts from her embodied writing.

. . . It is cold and windy. My body feels stiff and the ground is hard. Every step I take is jarring. . . I am out here alone, the forest seems menacing. Why do I do this? Jasper my pup is full of energy. She is off leash running and chasing, sniffing and leaping. Her joy is infectious. I can feel my body warming up. My movements are more relaxed. I am not

pounding the earth but am a part of it. I feel the strength in my body. I have prepared for this run and it is fun. . . . Running is all I am doing and all I have ever done. This run will never end. I am at peace. My pace is easy . . . I am running down a long slight hill into a marshy area where Jasper is lapping up the water. I smile while I watch her pure joy. I look up and I am amazed. There soaring above her are 4 bald eagles. The dog sees them and puts up a chase. The eagles swoop and dive . . . I lay down in the middle of the road to watch this display. Animals connecting. I feel the pure joy of myself not only witnessing this pantomime but being a part of it. I feel the joy of my dog running and jumping and the eagles' joy in the ability to fly and play. I do not know how long I lay there. I left when the eagles left. Even though they interacted with my dog, I felt they knew I was there and we were all celebrating our life that day. The sun was warm on my face. My breathing was relaxed and it felt extremely good to just stop moving. There was more to this day than running. I was not running away from things or life, but I was running to experience life. I was content. This is my life. I saw myself interconnected to my family, friends, and the natural world. I was a part of something grand. I got up off the cold ground . . . I ran past the familiar scenery knowing I was getting closer and closer to my goal. . . . I did not immediately pick up my son, but went home. I showered and lay on my bed naked looking at my body, my blistered feet and sore, sore body. I am proud of what that body did. And I thanked it for giving me the gift of completing this run and experiencing today.

As a result of this experience, Alana began to “look outside” of herself and see herself differently. “At times while in the forest I feel like an observer to the world around me and other times I am part of it, just another animal doing her thing.” In daily life now, she wrote, “I believe the world is a good place and people are basically good. We have to be open to love to receive it.”

Melinda. During a winter run in Yosemite Valley years before this study, Melinda left her family behind to venture out into the snow alone. The following excerpts from her embodied writing described an experience that now provides “continuity . . . to view my life as a graceful ribbon of time, with the act of running weaving that ribbon in and out of my days and years.”

. . . I had no particular destination, route, or even plan for how far or how long I'd be gone. But my family was used to that. . . . The snow was falling in big flakes. . . . The fat, slow flakes and the fog from the river put me squarely in the center of my very own snow globe. I was the merry figure encased in glass and time stood still. My winter running legs were strong—running to keep my body warm . . . I could feel the amazing sensation of my body regulating my temperature as I found just the perfect pace to keep me not-too-warm and not-too-cold. And it was at this pace that I lost myself . . . but at mile 4

something happened. I was at once the woman running and also the woman watching the woman running. I was the observer, the witness, the watcher, and I was observing, witnessing, watching myself running on the side of the road in my beloved Yosemite Valley. I felt such love for the woman running and the love seemed to flow between the watcher and the runner, strengthening both my ability to watch and my ability to run. It felt a bit like a circuit—each feeding the other. Tears flowed down my face, hot against my ruddy cheeks. Tears of release. Tears of happiness. Tears instead of sweat for the hard work my body was doing at my bidding. Seeing the bobcat at that moment sealed the deal for me. That particular sighting rendered me emotionally full—I recall feeling the spine thrill followed by an all-encompassing “knowing” that I was part of everything around me . . . trees, rocks, bobcat . . . a different feeling enveloped me. The snow had stopped and the clouds moved swiftly across the late afternoon sky. At that moment, as in so many other running moments, I felt lucky. Lucky for being able to move my body and still my mind. Lucky for seeing the details of nature that others routinely miss. Lucky for having a healthy outlet to burn off energy. . . . It was the run that connected me to the elusive feeling of connectedness to the universe.

Eileen. While participating in a 15.5 mile race in a humid, warm Texas state park, Eileen lost her course with only 2.8 miles left to run. In the following excerpts from her embodied writing, she described the negative, disappointing experience of unconsciously “leaving” her body that called her to become more aware of her limitations and character.

. . . As I settled into my finish line fantasy, I made a conscious decision to distract myself. . . . How I dread the feeling of near nausea, my head spinning, my mind screaming when I push my body to its physical limits. I want to slow down, but I cannot. Pray the Rosary, distract yourself, calm down, I scolded myself. Don’t give in to your weakness . . . I settle in to the rhythmic, meditative prayers of the rosary. I am calm. I am running. I don’t feel my body. I don’t hurt. I am no longer feeling the clammy air, I no longer feel my heart pounding. I am merely running, staring at the ground, making sure I don’t stumble on one of those tree roots that pop out of the ground without warning. I remain calm, I feel a floating sensation, but don’t acknowledge it consciously. I just run. The dank smelly earth and fallen leaves that followed me with their moldy odor now have no scent. The air feels cool on my perspiration-drenched singlet, and I feel drops of sweat on my stomach. . . . I just run . . . I look up. I am on the long wooden bridge that covers the ponds. What? I ran through these already. I know that there is only one stretch of these in the park—and I have run over them already. I stare at the white inviting lily pads and my heart picks up the beat, faster and faster. Other runners are running toward me. No! My voice screams suddenly inside my head and in a panic I ask a trio of female runners—something—I don’t even remember. I must have looked scary—they just ignored me and ran on. This is a dream, I comforted myself. No, this is not real. The weather is different in your dream. It’s sunny now. When you started, it was foggy. Runners always help one another—these ignored you. Got to be a dream, no a nightmare. An older man runs toward me. Where are you going? I ask. Are you running the 50-

miler? He looks at me, and calmly says, “you went the wrong way. You have to turn around.” I look at him in disbelief and turn around, tears welling up in my eyes with the realization of what had happened. Yes, I went the wrong way. I ran 18.5 miles that day, rather than 15.5. I was devastated and the pain I felt stayed with me a while. I actually questioned my faith. How could God do that? For Pete’s sake, I was praying the rosary!

Carolina. In the following excerpts from her embodied writing, Carolina described a private “gift” of an experience shared with human and animal friends in the mountains of North Carolina.

. . . There is an inch of snow remaining on the ground, and the wind is blowing. As we start out on the trail we grunt and moan all the while complaining of our aches, pains, and stiffness. . . . This particular day we are not as talkative and spread out a bit along the trail as we try to get into our running rhythm. . . . We begin our climb up Boyd’s Branch with all conversation reduced to short words and grunts. . . . My mantra is running over in my mind: steady, strong, safe, splendid. This hill is a bear, and I begin to think that I would like to cut this run short and take the single track back to the car. I know G. will agree. We are a team. Softly, something magical happens. As we approach our meeting spot it begins to snow big fat flakes. . . . The dogs begin to jump and chase as the snow begins to fall faster and heavier. It is beautiful, and we all join together with a renewed excitement to our run and to our conversation. We are running long. . . . The quiet of the snow is a welcome silence. We make the first fresh footsteps in the snow and are proud that they are ours. The thought of shortening our run disappears from my mind as we begin to marvel at the incredible beauty of this most spectacular snowfall . . . I know that what we are in the midst of is a gift, one that those in their warm homes will not see, feel, or share. We all continue to comfortably run in the soft snow finishing our run with joy in our hearts. Sore ankle gone and breathing easy, I thank God for the time I share with my friends each and every time we venture out together on the trails. Today may be snow, tomorrow a gentle rain, and the future a brilliant fall season of color, all a splendid gift from God. Simply splendid.

Marie. In the following embodied writing excerpts, Marie described her experience of running the opening leg of a team relay that began in morning darkness in the northern Minnesota wilderness.

. . . I trotted along with the other runners for as long as I could, but soon was alone, some ahead of me and some far behind. The inky blackness of the morning made it impossible even to see my watch. Instinct took over, and my feet seemed to know where the road was, though my eyes did not. In time, I began to see colors no person confined to home, car, and freeway would ever see. It occurred to me gradually that the road had taken on a charcoal tone. The trees were the deepest purple, and the sky was an impenetrable navy blue. I ran lightly, easily, knowing exactly where I was, running toward the opening in

the trees ahead. It was impossible to know if I was seeing or sensing the environment around me. And then it began. Slowly, exquisitely, one pixel of light at a time, it began. The sky lightened first, almost imperceptibly. Then I was able to see the white lines on the road, glowing faintly. The trees seemed darker at first, but soon began to show more details. I could make out branches and leaves. I was warmed by the sun rising off my left shoulder, still wrapped in early morning clouds and fog. I became acutely aware of my surroundings. I started to pick up speed. The road wound up and down, and at the top of a hill opened to a vista of incredible beauty. The endless living forest of the Sawtooth Mountains stretched out for miles before me. The trees were not the brilliant Crayola colors of a calendar. They were muted to pastel orange, gold, yellow, olive, and taupe. Far in the distance, swathed in haze, was the great lake itself. I took in a quick breath at the sight. Almost giddy, I charged down the hill at break neck speed, exulting in the run like a young colt running in a field. I felt at one with the universe, excited and blessed to have the ability to do this. I ran under a railroad bridge, down a short steep hill, and handed the baton to my teammate. “Wow! You’re early,” she screamed.

Marie’s reflections on her experience follow.

I felt connected to the universe as a whole. It helped me to feel a part of nature, including the cycles of nature such as leaves turning color. As I ran toward the lake I felt that I could see the curvature of the earth and was a child of the earth.

I think running in general has been very self-actualizing and has strengthened my ties to the earth. This particular experience also tied me to my animal self as I reacted to the nature around me.

. . . a sense of awakening, like waking up after being asleep for a very long time. I suddenly became aware of the world I was moving through in a way one cannot in an environment bounded by walls, floors, and ceilings.

. . . there are a huge number of people, not seeing, not knowing what is around them, stumbling blindly in dark, they need to open eyes to see what is there in life.

Impact of Distance Running in Nature on Women’s Embodiment and Spirituality

Each woman was asked to describe in writing how her transformative experience and distance running in nature, in general, impacted her embodiment or sense of “being a body.” She was also asked to engage in her own theorizing about the relationship between embodiment and spirituality, in light of reflecting upon her transformative experiences and sense of embodiment during the three data collection steps. These two interview questions generated responses that reflected both experiential insights and metaphysical understandings that were often very similar

or identical to one another. Excerpts from their responses included below are representative of the variety of responses shared.

In the following excerpts, participants explain their understanding of the relationship between their bodies and other aspects of themselves.

I see our bodies and our mind/soul as separate. We inhabit a body, but it isn't who we are. (Nelson)

Sometimes I have to remind my body's who's in charge. Sometimes I thank my body for taking me along. Sometimes my mind and body feel very unified in the goal of finishing the race. (Muriel)

. . . my body is literally my temple . . . my body is the means by which, the vehicle by which, I cultivate my connection to my divine self and to the universal divine. (Anna)

I have come to know my body as a conduit of the psyche (Kay)

I am a spiritual being with a body and I am a body infused with spirit/consciousness. (Aspen)

I believe that we are not our bodies, however our bodies are the physical manifestation of whatever it is that our spirits are creating. Sweet and expansive spirit = healthy happy body. (Melinda)

My spirit is very sweet and gentle with my body. . . . They are good friends. (Bethany)

. . . embodiment is a connection of the body, mind, and spirit. (Cassie)

I believe that we store and contain emotions such as love and fear in our bodies as well as in our minds. . . . I think this is a part of all of us having the mind of God. (Marie)

Distance running in nature and the transformative experiences described in this study have significantly impacted women's sense of embodiment and spirituality through increased body and sense awareness, as the following excerpts illustrate.

Running provides a very physical, sensual experience for me. . . . It made me more cognizant of my body. (Sheryl)

. . . believe I am much more aware of my body than a sedentary person is. Part of it is knowing every ache, pain, and weakness, but part of it is knowing I can trust my body to get me through a long run at 11 degrees, a run in rain and sleet, or a marathon. (Marie)

At the same time, running can offer me an escape from my physical body as I travel into my mind and allow thoughts to be processed or run wild. (Cassie)

I feel that I have at last reconnected with my own body. Thoughts and body interconnect and I have become quite aware of how changes in thought affect various parts of my body and how the ways that I am with my body affect my thought processes. (Aspen)

Being a body offers me the experience of spirituality through my senses. Using my senses, my spirituality is deepened and I feel more connected to the world, environment, and to the people around me. (Nicole)

. . . my body became a way for me to experience every aspect of being alive through my senses of smell, sight, touch, hearing, and taste. (Nicole)

Appreciation and love for body was also identified as an impact of transformative experience s while distance running in nature, as conveyed in the following excerpts.

Running has taught me how to appreciate my body and revel in its abilities. The strength I feel powering up a mountain and the pleasure I get sailing down the trail cannot be beat. (Alana)

. . . running allows me to love my body and to feel comfortable and confident in my body and that my body is something that makes me feel more sure in myself and of myself, maybe just more myself (Anna)

Descriptions of women's current understanding of the relationship between their own embodiment and spirituality reflected connection, fluidity, and ongoing change and growth, as the following excerpts represent.

My body and my spirituality do feel like they are together when I run. I can hear and internalize God's voice, impressions, feel what I know to be truth, not just try and convince myself of these truths. (Leah)

My body is part of my spirituality. As my body changes so does my spirit. My body ages and my spirit, I hope, grows with knowledge and life experiences. How can one age and not feel the wonder of what is next? As my body eventually slows down I can only hope my heart will expand. I am a work in progress. (Alana)

Sometimes as I am running I harken back to my 7-year-old self, my 12-year-old self, my 17-year-old self and realize that all of these running selves are layers like onion skin. They are all me—they always were and always will be. (Melinda)

Impact of Study Participation Upon Women

All of the women in this study described being impacted by their study participation in ways significant for each of them, often unexpectedly. Many described reflecting more deeply upon their experience than ever before, noticing with detail how they felt and what they were thinking during the experience, making new connections within the experience, and recognizing how the experience had later affected them and influenced their lives. What might have once been vaguely sensed, or understood only in part, was examined more closely, allowing the experience to become more “tangible,” while inviting the further manifestation of deeper effects of the experience upon their lives. Writing about their experiences evoked emotions present during and after the experience, and while writing, including gratitude, frustration, joy, pleasure, and self-doubt. For many women, the study helped them recognize and articulate the role, reasons, and meaning of running in their lives in new or renewed ways, leading to realizations of how vitally important distance running in nature is to each of them in unique ways. Commitments to values clarified by their experiences, especially the value of living with minimal impact upon the earth, were recognized or reaffirmed.

The process of engaging in embodied writing helped the women focus or reorganize thoughts in memories that allowed for the remembering of the self, sometimes joyful and other times painful. Some of the women expressed surprise at how much they remembered of their experience once still and quiet, preparing to write, and then freely writing. Michaela expressed joy at recalling a time in her life when she learned so much about herself and loved who she was. She recognized changes she needed to make in light of that self-recollection. For Nicole, the process required her to recall being raped on a date in college, and self-recollection was accompanied by more painful memories of being violated and recognition of the healing that has

occurred for her. The embodied writing process allowed many of the women to become fully present in their experience and body, and Aspen became “enlivened.” For Renee, an artist with a strong visual orientation, that process was like “drawing the experience in words,” an opportunity for creative expression appreciated by other women. Abigail has started a blog for sharing her experiences more widely in a newly discovered voice.

In these excerpts, women share how reflecting upon and writing about their transformative experiences through the steps of the study has impacted them.

Writing it down challenged me to express more specifically and in more detail what happened and how it affected me. (Sheryl)

It has deepened my thinking about this event. I’ve made some connections I had not as yet made. It has focused my thoughts in an ordered way instead of the chaotic memories I had of that race. (Nelson)

It has provided an opportunity for me to explore more deeply why and to what extent being in my body has been such a compelling, charged force in my life. (Anna)

It has allowed me to delve into my feeling when it is painful, and rejoice in my growth through sharing and writing. I found some of the questions difficult to understand and I was embarrassed and shameful of my lack of understanding. As I continued on in this study, I have been able to comfort myself and congratulate myself in completing this process. (Carolina)

The night I wrote about the rape, I cried. While I probably still carry a piece of the pain from the rape within me, the pain didn’t cause the tears. I cried because of how much I have grown since then. . . . It was a powerful experience to put down into words two distinctly different experiences: one which made me feel insecure, alone, and untrusting of myself and of others and the other experience which produced the exact opposite effects of creating confidence and an ability to trust my instincts about people and about situations and which made me feel connected. (Nicole)

It has had an impact on the fluidity of my emotions while running. It has also made other every day occurrences more “embodied,” causing me to have more enriching experiences. (Renee)

The following excerpts illustrate the impact of reviewing the preliminary data of this study on 3 participants.

. . . a majority of us do not have children I don't think that we are replacing being parents with running, but maybe it allows us the opportunity to be okay with the fact that we don't want what most other people do. And as a female, running has shown me my inner strength, so that I don't have to bend to societal pressures about what I "should be doing" at this age in my life. (Abigail)

In reading the experiences of other women, I was incredibly moved, often to tears Stories filled with joy and pain, love and loneliness, discovery and loss It is always comforting to know that there are others out there that have shared experiences, shared struggles, and shared feelings of elation when the struggles have been over come. (Renee)

Running can be so isolative that it I find it very meaningful to know that I share this passion and the reasons for it with so many other women. I am really moved by the stories and connections in these pages. (Kay)

Chapter 5: Cycles 4 and 5, Discussion

In Each Piece There Is Something of the Whole, the Whole Holds Each Piece

The purpose of this study was to explore women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. Given this exploratory approach, I appreciated each written response to a question, each "sacred text" of a woman's transformative experience, for its potential to contain and reveal something, in bits and pieces, of a whole. I also appreciated the seemingly inherent wholeness attempting to show itself within each bit and piece of writing. As I immersed myself in the generous written data shared by the participants, I became aware that the guiding metaphor of this transformative research process, and this next hermeneutical cycle, the making of a discussion from findings, was that of moving from "fragmentation to wholeness" (Metzner, 1980, p. 54). Paradoxically, though, the whole was present all the while. The following discussion reflects that wholeness, and a cocreative process of explicating the embodied spirituality of women who distance run in nature. In this chapter, I discuss the Cycle 4 process of transforming and refining the interpretive lenses identified during Cycle 2, and the Cycle 5 integration of the findings and literature review.

Cycle 4: Transforming and Refining Interpretive Lenses

During Cycle 4 of an intuitive inquiry, the interpretive lenses of the researcher identified in Cycle 2, prior to the data collection of Cycle 3, undergo a process of transformation and refinement (Anderson, 2004, 2011a, 2011b). In my experience, the researcher herself undergoes a process of being transformed and refined during deep engagement with the data, through the means by which she has chosen to enter into the data. In addition to carefully studying the

women's writings as sacred texts, my own practices of distance running in nature and dream work most frequently made known the patterns within the writings that needed to be seen.

On an unusually warm day in early November, as I began to collect data, I set out in shorts and a T-shirt for a 14-mile run on trails through the foothills of the San Francisco Peaks where I live. As the earth rose and dipped beneath my feet, as I noticed the way in which I either pushed myself along the trail or allowed the trail to reach out and pull my body forward, the air blew crisp and cool against my exposed skin. It was a Sunday morning and I had grown accustomed in the past months to calling these long training runs my "church." As I reflected upon the years that had passed since I last belonged to a formal religious community, I began to feel fully alive, lighter in body, at home in my skin, in the run, running through the wooded trails heavy with damp, limp pine needles. The birds chirped loudly, yet remained invisible, as my body became warmer and I was filled with gratitude for that solitary morning and the gift of my body. Once warm and relaxed and moving forward effortlessly, I allowed my mind to meander into creative brainstorming as I rock-hopped my way past Sunday morning hikers and their dogs. I turned a corner, looked out at the town below, revealing only bits of itself through the Ponderosa pines, felt grateful to live in this beautiful place, all while simultaneously thinking about and imagining my dissertation writing. Then the moment froze . . . perfect stillness. Ever so slowly, feet now off the ground, my body moved through the air toward a boulder that I slammed into head first, hands and legs sliding secondarily into it after scraping and tearing their way across gravelly earth. I felt, and heard, the crashing impact of my skull on rock, as bolts of pain shot instantaneously through my head. Then there was only silence.

Another endless period of stillness was finally broken by the thought, "I have hit my head and I am still conscious." I jumped up instantly, body surging with adrenaline, aware that I

remained conscious but needed to get help. Fortunately, I had carried my cell phone for the first time ever on a run and could call for help, which included a visit to the hospital emergency room. In the following week, I spent most of each day in bed feeling the sensations of scrapes, cuts, and bruises, and a mildly injured brain, healing in their own time.

Writing later about the experience using embodied writing, I recognized that while delightfully enjoying the creative processes of my mind, and the beautiful landscape I was running through, I was not fully aware of my own presence within, and as a part, of the landscape. I was mentally preoccupied, clearly engaged in those creative, problem solving states of mind that running has been documented to induce, while unmindfully and unbodyfully, traveling through the environment. Only when I fell and felt the physical impact of my head against stone had I become fully present in my body, and in the place where I physically was. Recalling this experience vividly through embodied writing helped me recognize the four states of attunement that contribute to a transformative experience while distance running, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Once I recovered from the head and other soft tissue injuries, I resumed training for a marathon, which was to be held in metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona on January 16. When the morning of the marathon arrived, I felt rested and ready to take a long, gentle run on pavement through a desert city. Despite not being in my usual mountainous running environment, I was excited to observe the effects of the marathon on me, continuing my personal experiment with embodiment. I planned to run slowly and comfortably, observing myself closely since the surrounding buildings, car, roads, and tens of thousands of people were likely to be less interesting. How might soul and spirit become present through my body during and after this run? As the sun rose and I ran into the dry, desert morning, I became calm, but alert, aware, and

increasingly attuned to regulating my pace and energy, so that I ran progressively faster from start to finish over several hours. When I reached mile 18, and many around me were slowing down, showing exhaustion in their faces and in their posture, I began to feel stronger and more powerful. Because this was not an exercise in speed, but in self-awareness, I conserved my energy well enough that by the finish I was running faster than the start and felt able to continue further, an unanticipated conclusion in this urban road-race environment that promotes and rewards the mindset and bodily enactment of drive and competition.

That night I had a series of dreams that I documented in my journal.

I am standing on a ledge and see my dog, Parker, floating in the ocean below. Two sea lions are biting on him and others surround them. I scream down to Parker to fight back and he begins to, rising out of the water to grab a sea lion by the neck. I am screaming, “Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!” and he does.

I am walking down a city sidewalk, and there are dogs lying and sitting everywhere, on the sidewalk and street. I cross paths with an unkempt man and ask if this is normal, if there are always this many dogs around here. Yes, he replies. Then a horse comes running into the street toward my right, frightened, and I wonder if dogs are chasing it. Then I see a wild cat—a tiger—in the street and know it is chasing the horse.

J. and I are hiking, emerging from the Grand Canyon. To get to the developed area of the South Rim, where we can get our car to leave for home, we must pass through a tower-like structure. We are now in the top of the tower and preparing to slide down through a passage to the rim with our packs and food. Three large brown bears, like grizzlies, approach the bottom of the passage where we must exit, and one pushes its head up through it, growling and grabbing for our food. I know we have to get through them and am wondering how since they are so huge.

As I transcribed the dreams in my journal, I became filled with potent dream emotions of anger, fierceness, curiosity, caution, power, and fear, and then filled with awe. Von Franz (1964) wrote

The Self is often symbolized as an animal, representing our instinctive nature and its connectedness with one’s surroundings. (That is why there are so many helpful animals in myths and fairy tales.) This relation of the Self to all surrounding nature and even cosmos probably comes from the fact that the “nuclear atom” of our psyche is somehow woven into the whole world, both outer and inner. (p. 220)

During the weeks before the marathon, I had been reading *Becoming Animal* by David Abram (2010) and reflecting upon the ways in which my own enculturation, as a human and as a woman in our modern, industrialized, technologized world, had contributed to feeling cut off from, and distrustful of, my own instinctual, animal nature. Running 26.2 miles on urban streets among thousands of people had stirred those tension-filled, domesticated, and wild animal instincts buried within me, setting them in conflict with one another, and forcing me to navigate an awe-inspiring, but potentially threatening, inner terrain. These dreams began to point me in an unexpected direction as I read through the women's writings. I was now in animal territory.

In late February, days before leaving on a trip to San Francisco and Death Valley in California, I awakened from a dream.

I am above, looking down at a large home centered in a large clearing within a thick, dense, dimly lit forest in the mountains. The house is newly built and belongs to my parents. I am visiting it for the first time. Then I am standing in the clearing in front of the house looking out at the forest and the perimeter of the clearing where it meets the forest. My father joins me, and I am aware he is not my human father. He is of extraordinary quiet strength. I ask him if there are animals that enter into the clearing from the forest. He says that, yes, bear, deer, elk, mountain lions, and other wild animals visit. He seems at ease with these wild animal visitors and that comforts my own dis-ease. I begin to imagine a bear coming into the clearing and wonder if I might become afraid. I have the house to run to, to be safe in, I think. Then, my location of my mind shifts, and I am in the mind of bear and my own mind simultaneously. I am aware, as the bear, of feeling protected by the dense, thick, dark forest, and my human mind wonders if I might experience fear coming into this clearing, being exposed to dangerous humans. Then I am standing outside the back of the house, closer now to the forest edge, and I see there is a well-worn path along the perimeter that my father walks. There is also a low metal fence carved into wild animal images (like the one that separates the garden from the larger backyard in my waking life). It won't keep animals out, I think, but it seems to serve as a creative representation of the forest animals. Then I am inside the house, in the bedroom and my mother, who also is not my mother in waking life. She feels vibrant and alive and is showing me the aqua colored pants she is wearing, taken from a closet filled with other pants in similar shades of aqua and blue. They are old pants with ruffled back pockets that fit perfectly, and yet she is wearing them, and showing them to me, as if they were new and fashionable. I think to myself that these are very old pants, ancient even, and am amazed that she can make them somehow look new and beautiful.

A few days later I was in a session with a spiritual guide describing the dream to her, explaining that it felt like a message dream—a gift—rather than a dream for processing emotions. I explained that the dream mother and father felt like guardians that I could now call upon for a new way of being in the world, and for mature spiritual guidance while awake.

The next morning I was wide awake at 4:00 am, thinking it must be near my usual waking time of 5:30 am. When I checked the clock, I sensed I had been wakened for a reason, but knew that with an evening meeting to attend I should try to sleep. I lay awake in bed for another half hour, becoming increasingly aware of a buzz of fear in my body; two days earlier I had questioned if this research had anything unique to contribute to the collective scholarship on psychospiritual transformation. As dawn broke, and the winter sun began to peak around the house across the street, I stepped outside into the freezing air to take an easy run through town, and, hopefully, move through this growing anxiety about the insignificance of this research. As I reached the end of the street, and prepared to turn left onto the course I had chosen, I caught a glimpse of the towering mountain peaks ahead, shimmering pink with morning light on snow. They filled my core with their quiet presence and beckoned me toward them. While my mind attempted to negotiate this new plan, my body began moving forward along the pavement in the direction of the mountains.

Running along the edge of the street past houses, then down Cherry Hill and up San Francisco Street, heading toward the hospital, beyond which lie the peaks, I was aware that my mind had shifted from fear and self-doubt into a creative flow of ideas about the particular focus of my research, the richness of the intuitive research process, and what the work might contribute to the body of work already done so skillfully, and differently, by other researchers. I was aware of allowing these thoughts to continue flowing as my body settled into a steady rhythm. The

pavement seemed willing to do the work of being mindful of my footfall so my mind could work on seemingly more important matters. I eased into a calmer, more relaxed trusting of my own knowing, while simultaneously feeling my body pulled forward by the immense physical presence of the mountains growing more luminous as I ran closer to their base. When I reached the last street light before entering into the neighborhood north of the hospital, I turned right onto a four-lane road where a few early morning workers were commuting toward their destinations. The mountains were pulling me toward the park, and I responded with a steady pace toward the gravel urban trail now packed with crunchy weekend snow and the tracks of earlier visitors.

Climbing gradually up the trail to the park entrance, I decided I would turn back toward home once I reached the parking lot. Instead, I reached the lot and suddenly felt the full embrace of the mountains around and through my body. There was no turning around. I noticed the lot was empty of cars—I was alone—as I ran forward into the park, along the center trail, directly toward the base of the peaks. Then I stopped suddenly. After feeling the constant pull by the mountains toward them, the mountain was now within me, solid, grounded, strong. We were together . . . and I realized that I was standing in the center of a circular, open clearing, the perimeter marked by a two-mile loop trail and bordered to the north by forest.

I was in the dream. The dreaming body (Mindell, 1993, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) was now fully present in the place where the new house stood. A new self had been constructed. A quiet masculine strength could now be entrusted with keeping the permeable boundary between the wild and the clearing. A vibrant feminine energy had transformed the old into something new and beautiful and wearable.

I continued to run forward, fully awake now to the oneness of the mountain ahead and the mountain within me, until I reached the fence that marked the boundary between the park and the

wilderness area. There, I stopped again, and rested for a few moments in the sensation of being a mountain body standing firmly on this edge between civilization and wilderness, my own cleared space and wildness. My mind entered into dream mind, laced with fear about a potentially threatening bear emerging from the thick, dark forest. Then my mind remembered bear mind, cautious about emerging from the safe cover of the dense forest into the clearing inhabited by potentially fearful and dangerous humans. Both fearful minds dissolved along this fenced edge, and I began to imagine with unusual delight the possibility of seeing a bear this morning. I remembered the she-bear Artemis coming to the mountaintop to save Atalanta from certain death. Past recurring dream bear images resurfaced as I gazed at, and breathed, the snow-covered mountains standing still and grounded beyond the fence.

Turning toward home, I ran again through the center of the clearing, feeling the static strength of the mountains at my back, the strength of my own center guiding me forward, and, now, the presence of the dream guardians with me. My feet crunched down the urban trail and I reached the stoplight. The mechanical whirring of the cars that passed surprisingly did not affect me as I waited for the green crossing signal. As I ran gradually downhill along the soft shoulder of the road home, I felt incredible lightness in body and clearness in mind. The anxiousness of the early morning hours had dissipated, been replaced with a lingering feeling of awe about what had transpired within me before the day had truly begun.

Earlier in February I had awakened from a dream.

I am in a spacious green yard, lush with vegetation, like in the South, and the grass is covered with piles of horse manure. My marathon training coach is there and she is telling me that I can run as fast as an elite male runner in my town for the downhill stretch. Then I am running alongside him, running faster than I have ever experienced or could imagine experiencing. I am bewildered, as I do not know how I am accomplishing this feat, yet I am experiencing this impossible speed fully and am exhilarated by it.

While I immediately sensed the dream was directly related to the forward progress of the research, I was cautious about taking it too literally. The richness I was encountering in the women's writings I was immersed in did seem to provide the lush, fertile ground for moving forward. Yet, my coach's confidence in my running abilities, which far exceeded my physical strength and speed in waking life, seemed incomprehensible, as did the dream experience of running with such power and speed.

Two weeks later, I travelled to San Francisco to meet my recently born first nephew. For over a year, I had been slowly meandering my way through the dissertation process, attempting to "pace" both the psychological healing and growth I was undergoing with the development of the research. I was especially mindful, and wary, of not letting the dissertation run ahead of what I could endure physically and emotionally. But while in San Francisco, I dreamt that I had called for a baby just born, and when it was delivered to me I saw, with unexpected shock and concern, that it was already a toddler. This struck me immediately as a warning that this creation of mine was long overdue, and despite my rational questioning about my ability to complete a draft within the next 4 weeks, an impossible task, I knew it was necessary. My prior dreams would provide the embodied capacity for that, whether or not I could suspend limiting beliefs about what was possible. A new mom had described her birthing experience to me as that of a train running its course regardless of what her mind wanted. While I did not resonate with the mechanical description of the process, I got her point, and knew it applied to my own process of metaphorical birthing in which labor was well underway and beyond control of what might seem reasonable.

During a camping trip to Death Valley, following the San Francisco visit, I was profoundly moved by the starkness of the valley and red, ochre, tan, and white walled canyons

holding me within the lowest place on the North American continent. During a hike in one of those canyons, I paused as my breath caught, tinged with a fear of confinement, and I absorbed the feeling of complete, bare, starkness of the earth. For days to follow I felt raw, exposed, and vulnerable. Once home, I began to experience a persistent tremor, and then trembling, within the core of my being, like the slowly building earthquakes I experienced regularly living in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska in high school. It felt as if muscles within my chest, and deeper still within my own canyon core, were constricting, as if attempting to hold something in place despite the movement.

On an early March morning run toward the San Francisco Peaks, I stopped in my tracks as words came to me like a prayer and I quietly repeated them without forethought, “Here I stand, mountain within me.” I stood until a sense of mountain-ness filled me from the core, radiating outward to extremities. This body, it seemed, was preparing the mind for the insight to come only hours later, that a core experience of mistrust was beginning to release, and that my body, and these stories of other women’s transformative experiences, were providing the strength to contain the truth of it. Seven years ago those transformative experiences running wintry forest roads had offered my body a taste of faith, of deeply embodied trust in my self, the earth, the universe, a taste I had continued to seek, and despaired of ever experiencing again as completely, despite the many felt and observable ways I continued to change and develop. Now, I was moving down into the depths of my own unstable terrain, grounded by stark canyons, valleys well beneath sea level, and my home mountains, to settle into the empty, familiar absence of trust and faith it seemed I had always known. Intellectually, I was stunned by the plain, visceral connection being made within me. My chest and heart ached with long held grief from the early traumatic sibling loss of my infancy.

Aches and pains, sleeplessness, and fatigue marked the following days. I took comfort in the psychological and spiritual reassurances imparted by Saint Teresa of Avila (2007) to her contemporaries that symptoms of ill health should not cause alarm during the soul's search for union with God. When I finally resigned to this current state, dreams of self-renewal arrived and waking energy returned. Remembering the overdue dream toddler, I knew that I would complete a draft of this dissertation in a time frame that seemed impossible to my rational mind. I gave myself 1 month, 4 weeks, put the ingredients in the alchemical cast iron pot, closed the lid, and turned up the heat. Combined, the raw material of the women's transformative experiences and my own transformative journey could be made into gold.

The heat was accompanied by constant memories of Death Valley and a desire to physically be there, to be as close to the earth as possible, which, in its starkness, is as close to the core of earth as one can get. Over dinner one evening in mid-March, following recollection of our trip to Death Valley, my partner asked about my writing progress and then, without solicitation, began to tell a story. Having heard this story many times before, I knew while completing her first marathon years ago she "saw God" in the form of incredible brightness. She had then turned to see a woman, a stranger, who told her the end (the finish line) was near. This woman had felt completely trustworthy and believable. At the usual conclusion of the story, however, there was more that I had not heard before. This time she added that the experience opened her to her very core, the very core of herself, where her own Divinity lived.

The Cycle 4 hermeneutical lenses emerged during this transformative process of many months, immersed in the women's embodied writings and interview question responses while attending reflectively to my own waking experiences and dreams. These lenses seemed to embody an integration of earlier lenses with new insights into simpler, more descriptive

conceptualizations of the research topic. Looking back at the original lenses I developed, I was surprised at how formulaic and precise they felt to me now, especially those lenses focused on the relationship between trauma and transformation which revealed to me an implicit desire to establish causality, to find a “cure,” to bring order to my own inner chaos. I called the new, more fluid lenses Integrative Lenses, as they reflected a sense of now being held, and thus understanding from, within a greater whole, a web woven of the women’s experiences, my experiences, and my own transformative process along the way.

Integrative Lenses

1. During a transformative experience while distance running in nature, a woman enters into two or more states of attunement—intrapersonal, interpersonal, trans-species, or trans-terra—that open a core spiritual sense of interconnectedness with her self, human others, animals, and the earth. The transformative experiences shared by the women in this study appeared to be characterized by entrance into at least two of four states of attunement or deep awareness simultaneously, intrapersonal and trans-terra, which I define later in this chapter. States of interpersonal and trans-species attunement may also be present during her transformative experience. These states of attunement seemed to arise spontaneously within the body during the rhythmic synchronization of the breath and movement, resulting in both mindfulness and bodyfulness, or heightened awareness of movement, senses, and feelings, and expansion beyond a more inward focused meditative state. They also seemed to allow a woman to transform and transcend barriers to her embodiment caused by earlier trauma or loss, characterized most often by a sense of disconnection or dis-ease, through attuned relationship with her self, other humans, wild and domestic companion animals, and the earth. Recognizing

attunement with other humans and animals was a surprising development in my encounter with the women's writings.

This lens became apparent to me through repeatedly reading aloud of the women's embodied writings about their experiences, an afternoon spent charting out words that seemed central to descriptions of the women's experiences as I read, and reflection upon my own running accident described earlier in Cycle 4. The pattern recognition and descriptions of intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement came quickly, derived directly from the embodied writing excerpts in Chapter 3 and my own embodied writing about the accident, as I was familiar with literature on interpersonal trauma and mindfulness that address these concepts. However, there were no concepts for recognizing and describing trans-species and trans-terra attunement, so I returned continually to the excerpts of the embodied writings presented in Chapter 4 for descriptive words as I formulated those concepts.

2. During a transformative experience while distance running in nature a woman's transpersonal Self becomes present, opening her to moments of feeling filled with faith, gratitude, grace, and/or love, which may become sustained transpersonal traits in her life.

The transformative experiences of women in this study confirmed my original assumption that distance running in nature generates a sense of trust within the body. However, that trust is more fully felt and understood as a momentary and lasting transpersonal quality of faith that becomes integrated into a woman's daily life as a trait. Faith is also often accompanied by unbidden gratitude, grace, and/or love, which I did not anticipate finding despite the developing presence of these traits within my own life through distance running in nature. The initial "moments of feeling filled" and ongoing traits seemed to call for the receptivity of a strong and yet permeable body.

My identification of these traits resulted from reading aloud women's embodied writings and responses to the background and interview questions, and noting the repeated usage of words with deep emotional significance, for me and, seemingly, for the women. Upon noting each one of the traits, it seemed to appear more frequently in my thoughts, conversations with others, and in the world usually in writing, on book covers, in texts I was reading, even on magazine covers facing me in the grocery store checkout line.

3. Distance running in nature as a spiritual practice potentiates transformative processes of individuation, self-healing, and becoming animal (Abram, 2010) that contribute to a women's deepening embodiment and continuing psychospiritual development. I originally believed that by deepening connection to, and relationship with, nature through the body, women might experience interpersonal healing. This limited perspective was greatly expanded by the recognition of three interrelated processes occurring simultaneously, in relationship with nature and the world as a whole, which seemed to inform how a woman experienced and described her body. These processes were sometimes activated by a woman's conscious effort to change, and other times activated by the uncontrollable and emotionally challenging events of her life. They were always marked, however, by changes in emotion and consciousness, and awareness of her active participation in these processes even when she was not "driving" them.

Like the transpersonal traits identified above, the patterns of these processes became apparent to me while reading and noting words and phrases in the embodied writings and responses to background and interview questions presented in Chapter 4 that struck me with emotional intensity, and seemed to illuminate a learning or insight from my own Cycle 4

process. Each process was confirmed by one or more dreams that allowed me to know the process more fully from within, beyond my own lived experience of the process.

4. Women who engage in distance running in nature as an ongoing spiritual practice cultivate a recognizable, embodied core spirituality. The women in this study experienced distance running in nature as a deeply meaningful, life changing practice that served as a foundation for the cultivation of a rich, sustaining personal spirituality they were able to describe in their own creative terms or through the concepts of traditional religiosity. The felt sense of the heart of this embodied spirituality, for me, was of being increasingly and continuously aware of, returned to, and changed at, the deepest levels of her whole being, at the “core.” Access to this core was initiated by entering, rhythmically, into one or more states of attunement characterized by a profound, unified present-ness in body and mind during which the transpersonal Self emerged and became receptive to the inward flow of transpersonal qualities that were often carried into and sustained in daily life, expressed in her relationships and values. The interspiraling developmental movement toward this embodied “core” spirituality included active immersion in processes of individuation, self-healing, and becoming animal (Abram, 2010) that deepened her embodiment and contributed to her ongoing transpersonal development.

Recognition of this “core” spirituality came late in Cycle 4 and was precipitated by the experiences in Death Valley, which provided an immediate, visceral, bodily sense of a concept I had felt trying to emerge from within me to describe something fundamental about the women’s experiences. Once I attributed the word “core” to it, I began to recognize the use of this word in the women’s writings, and a pattern of its usage in the literature, often in reference to related, yet different topics.

5. Women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature, and participation in this study, generated a shift from an externalized spiritual authority to one that was embodied and participatory with nature as authoritative. While I could not see this as clearly at the start of the study, the Methodological and Procedural Lenses I developed in Cycle 2 intended to authorize the spiritual truth of our lived experiences and their shared resonances. Resonance between our transformative experiences and the study topic was the starting point for the research. Using embodied writing to describe their transformative experiences and interpret their meaning, provided the solitary space and structure for women to feel their experiences fully and deeply, gain insight into, and further claim and integrate, their spiritual truths. Approaching and interpreting women's writings as sacred texts, and using my own running and dream work practices as research "tools," permitted me to intuit deeper levels of complexity and meaning from them as sources of sacred wisdom. Together, we have grown, I exponentially so, in the process. There were no surprises here. What I did not realize, however, was that my methodological and procedural lenses were freeing me to acknowledge the spiritual truths of my own experiences, and those of other women, and claim the authority to write them into being.

Recognition of this lens was initially disturbing and emotionally painful, and based almost entirely on a felt sense of an unexpressed undercurrent in the writings presented in Chapter 4, and in a stark moment of realization that I had changed, which came toward the end of Cycle 4. As I moved more fully into it, emotionally, I became aware that claiming it would unsettle a lifetime of fear that had firmly held my own submission to external authority firmly in place despite repeated efforts to break free.

The five lenses summarized here were derived intuitively, and materialized from within the data in nonlinear ways that may not be explicitly evident to all readers. Anderson (2011a) suggests that five types of intuition may inform an inquiry like this, and I am aware that “unconscious, symbolic, and imaginal processes” (p. 22), “sensory modes” (p. 24), “empathic identification” (p. 26) and the woundedness of the researcher (p. 26) were operating in the refinement and integration of these new lenses. The content of each lens is explained in much greater detail in the remainder of this chapter and I encourage the reader to seek verification through her resonance with the discussion as well as clear connections between the data presentation in Chapter 4 and the discussion.

Cycle 5: Integration of Findings and Literature Review

Despite the physical, emotional, and intellectual intensity of writing for many hours per day as the pot cooked, I began to experience unfamiliar sensations of vitality, lightness, and fluidity permeate my body. During the third week of writing I dreamt:

I arrive at a parking lot where, years earlier, I parked my light blue metallic pick-up truck in a central spot. I go looking for the car where I know I left it and it is not there. Despite continued searching I cannot find it, so I walk to the attendant booth and ask the woman where my car is. She looks it up and tells me where it is parked. I walk to this new location and in the designated place is a large metallic gold luxury car. I know it is my car although the interior and exterior structure, as well as the color, have completely changed.

The body, this body of mine, had now completely changed in form and place. Did I recognize it?

The Sunday night that began my final week of drafting was dream-filled. I ran faster than I could imagine in the first dream, faster than I had with the elite runner weeks earlier, and it was exhilarating. In another dream, I entered an elevator that would move horizontally and vertically, simultaneously, to a final destination. The inside was wildly colorful and resembled Disneyland or Wonderland. There was a young male attendant who began to tell the people in the elevator

they would experience incredible speed and movement as we headed toward our destination. He looked directly at me and I knew that he knew I get motion sickness from moving too fast. I decided that I could tolerate the rapid change in location by staying fully focused on what I was experiencing within the moving container of the elevator, which was strong enough to withhold what was about to happen. The process of change within the strong enough body can happen instantaneously, I think when I awaken. That is what Fosha (2006) called quantum transformation.

In final days of drafting, a renewed tension began to permeate my body and mind with a nearly unbearable tenor. The doubt in my ability, the fear of my ability, to articulate the findings of this research that accompanied it was also nearly unbearable, and I requested one evening, in desperation, guidance from the dream world on how to proceed with completing the final Cycle of this study. That night I dreamt that I was viewing a map of a circular blue lake that was surrounded by a trail I would completely traverse. I could see by the illustration that the trail moved through alternating patches of forest and then clearing, forest and then clearing, for the entire circumference of the lake. I would be running this trail for the first time and felt trepidation about the map being enough to guide me. Then I went into a bathroom to “relieve” myself. When I returned to the map a woman had arrived and was standing there. She said she had traveled this circular trail many times before and would guide me.

At the inception of the research process, between Cycles 1 and 2, I had sensed an undercurrent of movement, both intellectually and energetically, that carried on through the research process. During Cycle 1, I would catch a glimpse or sense impression of Cycle 2, as my body began to undergo a calibration process, shifting energetically back and forth until I was thrust forward into Cycle 2, like the childhood experience of shooting out the end of a dark,

silent, twisting waterslide into the depths, buoyancy, and light of the open swimming pool. Soon, the same undercurrent of movement began stirring, the same movement of an electrical current traveling back and forth, increasingly faster, between two charged entities until a point of equilibrium had been reached, and I was again thrown out into the pool. Intuitively, I would catch glimpses of the direction the research might be heading in, and intellectually I was eager to get there, but it was not until I had immersed myself in the layers of work within the present Cycle that I was initiated into the new work of the next Cycle. For the first three Cycles the process maintained a very tight forward-moving structure of completing the current work to then be moved forward.

However, as I moved into Cycles 4 and 5, I began to turn back and recognize details of work left undone in the earlier cycles that I had not been aware of needing to tend to. Consciously, I had begun to trust my body to guide the movement of the research, and trusted the Cycles to direct my forward movement within the study. Then, in this final Cycle, I recognized the cycling, spiraling pattern of psychospiritual development that had also characterized Cycle 4. Referring to an “operating guideline” (Plotkin, 2009, p. 72) within his theory of eco-centric, soulcentric human development, Plotkin wrote, “You must learn to love your current stage and its tasks. Once you do, you’ll soon enough be cast out of it by the Mystery” (p. 73). While this has been true for the first three Cycles, in Cycles 4 and 5, I began looking backward, as if in a “return cycle,” for unfinished work needing completion, albeit previously unseen, while simultaneously immersed in formulating new hermeneutical lenses and integrating findings with existing research and theories.

During Cycles 4 and 5, I also recognized that I had been distinguishing, not always consciously, between material relevant to the research process for inclusion in this report, and

that derived from my own concurrent therapeutic process. Anderson (2011a) states, “the procedural containment of intuitive inquiry provides the opportunity to meander safely, rather like good psychotherapy” (p. 36). However, the researcher must be able to discern what ought to be addressed in the research, and what ought to be addressed in a therapeutic context. While providing the procedural steps needed to organize the data into meaningful patterns, the intuitive inquiry process also facilitated the organization of chaotic, overwhelming emotions that had flooded forth during my initial proposal development. Along the way, I learned to embrace a newly ordered intuitive capacity, likely derived from trauma, as a creative gift rather than an overwhelming, debilitating burden.

Cycle 5 in an intuitive inquiry calls for a return to the literature review as the researcher “reevaluates that theoretical and empirical literature in light of her findings” (Anderson, 2011a, p. 59). For the remainder of this chapter, I reflect upon the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 in light of the unique findings of this study first articulated in the Integrative Lenses, interweaving it with new literature as needed to illuminate what I have learned about women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature, and the embodied “core” spirituality of women who engage in distance running in nature as a spiritual practice.

Transformative Experiences While Distance Running in Nature in Context

The past and present psychological benefits. Women’s descriptions of their past and present relationships with running, and explanations of how their transformative experiences while distance running in nature have impacted their lives, validate the findings of prior qualitative studies addressing the psychological benefits, and phenomenological experience, of distance running for women. The women in this study experienced increased empowerment, self-esteem, and self-confidence as a result of running, including training for and completing distance

running events like the marathon (Grant, 1987; Leedy, 2009; Majcen, 2007). They also described significant positive mental changes, increased self-awareness and self-understanding, and increased self-efficacy as a result of distance running (Boudreau, 2009; Boudreau & Giorgi, 2010). Each of the 23 women in this study described aspects of each of the six constituents described by Boudreau and Giorgi (2010), suggesting that the phenomenological reality proposed by the researchers is common among novice women distance runners including those who distance run in nature. For the women in this study, these initial benefits experienced while distance running often provided the motivation and inspiration to continue running. Over time, years and even decades, their running developed into a transpersonal spiritual practice shaped by transformative experience, which continued to nourish each woman's cultivation of an embodied spirituality that is recognizable among women for whom distance running in nature is a spiritual practice.

Resolution of childhood and adult trauma to create meaningful spiritual lives. Many of the women who participated in this study no longer identified with or actively practiced their childhood religion, did not have current affiliation with an existing religious tradition or community, and were engaged in the process of cultivating a personal spirituality of which distance running in nature served as a primary spiritual practice. Those women who had continued to identify, and, in some cases, remain involved, with their childhood religion, or who identified as practicing some form of Christianity and was or was not involved in a religious community, appeared to have been able to integrate running into their religious and/or personal spiritual life and identity as a Christian. The breadth and depth of qualities used to describe their religious and spiritual lives, and the richness of their descriptions of their spiritualities, suggested they had given careful attention to the formation of a meaningful personal spirituality based in a

sense of personal authority, and the creative incorporation of meaningful sources of spiritual insight into their lives, or by relying upon those beliefs within a traditional theological framework that could support the truth of her own personal spiritual experience.

Given the frequency and variation of childhood and adult trauma among the women, the degree to which they had been able to positively construct nourishing spiritual lives, albeit continually developing, was surprising. It was clear that most of the women had addressed childhood wounds and adult traumas through the healing work of feeling unresolved pain to create a sense of spiritual connection within (Ryan, 1998). Nelson poignantly described this awareness of the relationship between emotional and physical pain and spirituality: “Perhaps accessing your past pain leads to an opening in the spiritual realm and an allowance with what is (right then, not a mental projection).” For her, distance running in nature has served as a doorway for both identifying and alleviating pain that might otherwise be overwhelming for her, “for cleaning up ‘old messes.’” Her writings suggested she was fully engaged in the healing work that is necessary for a woman who has experienced earlier trauma to cultivate an adult spirituality. While running she was feeling her way through long carried pain with self-compassion, rather than seeking to repress or transcend it.

States of Attunement Present During Women’s Transformative Experiences

Through attentive, repeated reading of each woman’s embodied writing account of her transformative experience I recognized that four states of attunement were commonly occurring across experiences. Siegel (1999, 2007) described attunement, within the context of attachment and mindfulness theories, as an individual’s focused attention on the internal world of another through which both persons enter into a state of mutual alignment often experienced as mental and emotional resonance. Mindfulness, a “form of attentional skill that focuses one’s mind on the

present” (Siegel, 2007, p. xiii), and a “form of healthy relationship with oneself” (p. xiii) is an outgrowth of intrapersonal and interpersonal states of attunement. The transformative experiences explored in this study led me to posit that definitions of attunement could be expanded to include awareness of the internal worlds of other species and land. The resulting ways of being are both mindfulness and “bodyfulness” (Ferrer, 2008, p. 6). Ferrer explains

In bodyfulness, the psychosomatic organism becomes calmly alert without the intentionality of the conscious mind. Bodyfulness reintegrates in the human being a lost somatic capability that is present in panthers, tigers, and other “big cats” of the jungle, who can be extraordinarily aware without intentionally attempting to be so. (p. 6)

The rhythmic synchronization of breath and movement that naturally resulted during sustained distance running in nature at a comfortable, relaxed pace created the conditions for all of the women in this study to enter into one or more states of attunement. The words “present,” “presence,” “aware,” “awareness,” and “attention” were frequently used to describe entering into or being in a state of intrapersonal, interpersonal, trans-species, or trans-terra attunement, or some combination of multiple states simultaneously. All of the transformative experiences described the simultaneous occurrence of intrapersonal attunement and trans-terra attunement, suggesting they are necessary states for a transformative experience while distance running in nature, for movement from the personal self to the transpersonal Self.

Intrapersonal Attunement. Siegel (2007) described intrapersonal attunement as the creation of “a loving relationship of self-engagement with our own direct experience” (p. 130) through mindful awareness. Through intrapersonal attunement we develop an attentive, loving, compassionate relationship with ourselves as our own best friend that allows us to expand outward, relationally, to others with mutuality and authenticity. All of the women’s accounts of their transformative experiences reflected the presence of qualities of intrapersonal attunement including heightened sense awareness, awareness of emotion, awareness of sensation within the

body, awareness of mental states, and awareness of feeling connected to others. During intrapersonal attunement there was active listening to and through the body (Rowe, 2003).

All of the women in the study described a heightened intensity of one or more of their five senses—sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste—often near the beginning of their run and peaking during the most transformative moments of their experiences. Through this heightened sense awareness the women became highly attuned through their senses to what might have otherwise gone unnoticed. As Marie wrote, “I began to see colors no person confined to home, car, and freeway would ever see,” referring to her proximity to colorful nature while also contrasting her experience with the dull, artificial environments that humans in Western countries often inhabit, senselessly. She continued her description: “. . . the road had taken on a charcoal tone. The trees were the deepest purple, and the sky was an impenetrable navy blue.”

Many of the transformative accounts began with negative descriptions of the women’s emotions, bodily sensations, or mental states, often in response to the weather or other conditions of the pre-run environment: uncertainty, discomfort, apprehension, frustration, fear, anxiety, doubt, sadness, loneliness, grief, regret, or being cold or too hot. Upon reaching a state of intrapersonal attunement, when emotions, body, and mind were engaged in harmonious communication, the women’s emotions most often became positive, reflecting a wide range of affective capacity: trust, confident, glee, love, hope, lucky, enthusiastic, wonder, fearless, content, happiness, excitement, joy, exhilaration, thankfulness, tranquility, peace, and calm. Some women cried tears of “wonder-joy” (Braud, 2001, p. 99), or tears of relief, grief, or vulnerability. Abigail wrote, “There was no inner negativity, no questioning my ability, just pure joy in the moment, my body, my inner power, and a feeling I was connected to myself in a way I only experience when I run.”

Words like expansive, fluid, energetic, invincible, calm, loose, light, flying, warm, at ease, strong, comfortable, without need, grounded, free, and relaxed were used by the women to describe their bodies in a state of intrapersonal attunement. Some were aware of an inner “vibration” or were acutely aware of the specific movements of their bodies (e.g., arch flexing, toes gripping) or sensations within their bodies (e.g., lungs burning, quads aching).

The women also described clear mental awareness of their efforts to become mentally present or maintain mindfulness, of intense focus, and of simultaneous awareness of past, present, and sometimes future. Sheryl described this integration of past memories with present experience:

Western bluebirds swoop and flutter from pine to pine, their bright blue bodies and rusty breasts familiar and beloved since I was a child, visiting my grandparents in Colorado from the Maryland suburb where I grew up. Memories from childhood mix with those I’ve made on this very trail.

Through the course of their accounts, they tracked subtle and continual changes within themselves, setting the stage for a transformative experience to arrive on the scene.

Interpersonal Attunement. During a state of interpersonal attunement, “we align our being with the being of another, as we transfer energy and information between each other to resonate . . .” (Siegel, 2007, p. 317). The actively listening mind, body, and heart become present (Dass & Gorman, 2003; Rowe, 2003; Smith, 2003). In describing their present relationship with distance running in nature, many of the women expressed the value and therapeutic benefits of sharing the running experience with others, especially female friends. The transformative experiences of Abigail, Muriel, and Carolina vividly illustrate interpersonal attunement within the context of a transformative experience.

Abigail described her self and her running friend as “feeling connected, feeling proud of our selves, and enjoying the run.” They were together, sharing both feelings and the experience.

When confronted with the challenge of climbing a hill she expressed thankfulness “for the girl at my side whose friendship and presence was motivation to lean into myself and trust that I could” The rhythm of their shared breathing and footfalls allowed them to move beyond their limitations, the significance of which needed only to be communicated nonverbally between them, with grins.

Muriel described starting out on a routine run with a female friend that broke from the familiar pattern of conversation when the friend began to cry. She asked the friend to stop running and then embraced her body. Attuned now to her friend’s emotions, Muriel wrote, “I feel her small, strong body take in and release some deep breaths.” Her concern that she has responded as needed by her friend, and the sense of intimacy and connection the moment invited, revealed her attunement to the internal state of her friend as well as her own internal state.

Carolina, like Abigail and Muriel, established a running rhythm with her friends as they climbed a mountain trail that reduced conversation to “short words and grunts.” When snow began to fall, the “I” within her experience became a “we” as friends shared in the beauty and excitement of this “magical” moment. They marveled together, running comfortably to the point of conclusion “with joy in our hearts.”

Interpersonal attunement may also be extended to a God experienced as personal and relational, rather than distant or detached. Kelly, for example, wrote of “finding the beauty in the raw, natural state of this Earth,” not simply from the perspective of her humanness, but from God’s view of creation as offered to her by God. Through this attunement with God, she became more aware of her own self.

Trans-Species Attunement. Encountering a wild animal was a common occurrence in the transformative experiences shared by women in this study. I began to use the term *trans-*

species attunement, or attunement across species, to describe the evident awareness a woman has of the internal world of another animal. In a state of trans-species attunement, a woman became aware that she and the animal were engaged in a form of communication, or as in interpersonal attunement, a sharing of energy, that generated a feeling of resonance within the woman or a heightened awareness of her self in relation to the animal. As in interpersonal attunement, the full listening self was present. If Panksepp and Northoff (2008) are correct, these encounters with wild, nonhuman mammals or other vertebrates in which communication was experienced might have been a meeting of shared core selves, or common neural networks that allow for “self-related processing” (p. 193).

A powerful example of trans-species attunement with a wild animal was described by Nicole, who encountered a fox while running in the Colorado mountains. The encounter began with the fox looking at Nicole, as she stopped and tried to quiet her breath. She observed the details of his animal body as he watched her in stillness. She wondered how he was experiencing her and then whispered a greeting to the creature. He relaxed, and they engaged in communication that revealed mutual trust: “We communicate without sound and I feel that we both understand that we will not harm each other.” She began to move her body again and he, too, began to move before settling into a comfortable resting place. The encounter evoked heightened senses, increased energy, and an awareness of being a part of a greater whole.

Gillian encountered a raven while running in Alaska and they exchanged knowing communication in their brief engagement.

She seemed to have been chasing me and as I stopped chattered at me as ravens often do. We cocked our heads at each other as if asking to continue. The storm was calming, as did our pace down the path. She followed me to where the trail crossed under a road and into the more urban part of the park. I am guessing she returned upstream

Madeline's experience while running with her dog illustrated trans-species attunement with a domestic companion animal. Her dog's exhibited feeling of freedom evoked her own feeling of being free; his thirst was matched by her thirst, and they both drank from a stream. Similarly, Carolina wrote, "The dogs begin to jump and chase as the snow begins to fall faster and heavier. It is beautiful, and we all join together with a renewed excitement to our run and to our conversation." The "we" included human others, but it was clear that Carolina was, in that moment, attuned with another species, a dog, as well as interpersonally attuned with her human companions.

Alana was running with her dog when four bald eagles appeared soaring above them. The dog began to chase as the eagles began to "swoop and dive." After some internal resistance, Alana succumbed to the moment and "lay down in the middle of the road . . . not only witnessing this pantomime but being a part of it." With her own joy, she felt the "joy of my dog running and jumping and the eagles' joy in the ability to fly and play." Together they shared in an attuned moment of trans-species celebration.

Trans-Terra Attunement. Many women in the study described a state of attunement with the land and elements, for which I could find no existing terminology. I began to call this state *trans-terra attunement*, or attunement across the land of the earth and the "land" of the human body. In trans-terra attunement, the internal world and body of the woman mirrored the land she was engaged with or imagined engagement with, or she recognized her own internal world mirrored in nature. This state was often described with language that conveyed a sense of being a part of, or also, nature, as her self, rather than as an observer of nature, or moving through nature as though through a separate space. It also involved active listening to the land (Hutton, 2003). In some accounts, the rhythms of nature seemed to evoke this state along with

the rhythmic breath and movement of the running woman. Gillian wrote of running in the rain alongside a river as the wind pushed through immense trees: “It became nature’s concert of rhythms that exhilarated me into a moment where every sense was a heightened awareness of how euphoric I felt to be part of this natural world.”

Sheryl described multiple moments of trans-terra attunement, reflecting many forms of this state of awareness. “I imagine myself as water, flowing, pulled by gravity’s undeniable force down the trail, over and around the rocks,” she wrote of one moment. In another, “Standing on tiptoe I touch my head to the needles. A clump of snow slides off and I get a collar full of freezing flakes. I laugh. So, the world can also play.”

As Gillian ran through the woods, “I was the storm and like the wind flowed through the trees, keeping up with the rush of water. Stopping to catch my breath, I listened as the rain and my breath slowed in harmony.” With trans-terra attunement comes a feeling of intimacy, empathic resonance, and even unity with the land. Nicole wrote, “I am the water, the wind, the earth, the fox.”

When describing this state, women used the following words to describe both emotions and the body: thrilled, euphoria, awe, aliveness, peace, cared for, tranquil, light, flying, hope, heart overflowing with joy, peaceful, thankful, trusting, engrossed, overwhelmed, bright, and belonging. They conveyed an acute awareness of their physical presence as paradoxically important and miniscule, impactful and small, within the world and the universe.

When a woman enters into attunement with herself, other humans, other animal species, or the land, she may be filled with a sense of atonement, at-one-ment, the restoration of a feeling of wholeness or goodness that has been lost or never known. As expressed by Nicole, “I know I am a part of something larger and I feel a goodness that I didn’t feel earlier.”

Lack of Attunement as a Catalyst for Transformative Experience. Another paradox was the *lack* of attunement conveyed in a few women's transformative experiences, which seemed to have as powerful an effect in evoking the transpersonal Self as entering into attunement. In her embodied writing, Eileen described choosing to "distract" herself, or disconnect her mind from her body using prayer, a decision that resulted in "a floating sensation," or dissociation from her body. When she became again aware of her surroundings, she realized she was in a place she had physically been before. Panicked, she tried to comfort herself and discern reality from this "nightmare" situation in which the weather had changed and usually friendly runners were ignoring her. She began to cry in disbelief once she learned she had gone the wrong way, and her ego self reacted potently, blaming God for the situation. This was not the first time Eileen had "zoned out" while running, and, as a result of this experience she became more mindful and more bodyful, consciously choosing to stay present while running.

Michaela described an encounter with an elk that evoked a potent embodied awareness of the animal, and of her own place in relation to the elk, which was not congruent with her ego's original sense of ownership of the forest. The roaring, scraping sounds made by the animal broke through her initially well-anchored state of intrapersonal attunement, requiring her to become uncomfortably aware that she was sharing the forest with another purposeful creature far larger than her. The initial disorientation and dissonance of the encounter reduced Michaela to a "sense of unimportance," "merely a speck in these woods." As a result, she questioned her own prior actions and significance, wondering how her presence may have affected the elk, and recognized the forest as a shared home.

Nelson's experience offered a contrast between attunement and a lack of attunement in her writing about 2 days in a multiday run that was transformative as a whole for her. During the

first day of the run she described mental confusion, physical discomfort and pain, and emotional distress that brought her to “a new low” she had not previously experienced. She was disengaged with others and focused on her own distressing pain. At one point in the day, Nelson could not remember traveling uphill or downhill on her feet, believed “the ground is against me,” and saw none of the animals that were usually present during her runs. She was lacking in all four states of attunement, and suffering.

The next day, however, was strikingly different. Nelson’s climb over a mountain began with, “I can hear the ground talking to me.” She felt hopeful, and her enjoyment of her running rhythm contributed to feeling strong and capable. She became “attached” to her experience, which I interpreted as present for, rather than dissociated from. She could fly in her light body, practicing the “art of letting go” as she navigated rocky terrain. Pushing past her limits, her invincible body provided a “new high” of experience unknown to her before.

Differentiating States of Attunement From Meditation and Nature Mysticism

It is evident that the states of attunement identified in the transformative experiences described by the women in this study can be differentiated from meditative states, in which the attention of an individual turns fully inward and transcendent, and from nature mysticism, in which an individual loses all sense of self in a fully immersive experience with nature (Wilber, 2000). While the women’s present reasons for running and transformative experiences certainly include benefitting from meditative qualities, such as peacefulness and tranquility, and qualities of mysticism, such as a sense of timelessness or unity or universal oneness (Daniels, 2005), there always remains, through attunement, a sustained bodyfulness or awareness of being a body moving with nature, and a relationality with the earth, an animal, or another human. When bodyfulness is lost, as in Eileen’s case, the experience might still be transformative, but

unpleasantly so. The simple reason for this may be explained by my running accident that resulted in a minor head injury—the body must stay aware to avoid getting hurt when moving in nature.

The experiences identified as transformative by the women in this study reflect the fundamental need for relationality, and connectedness to the senses and alienated nature that previous considerations of women's spirituality have emphasized (Adams, 1993; Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Borysenko, 1996; Slee, 2004). This relationality is expanded to include self, the earth, animals, and human others. Transformative experiences resulting from a lack of attunement with self, the earth, animals, or human others, and, thus diminished relationality, are comparably significant but distressing. What is both experienced and sought by women during these experiences is best described by Anna, “. . . a mental clarity that in a very fundamental way allows me to experience nature more clearly and sharply and intimately.”

States of Attunement, the Transpersonal Self, and Transformation

During transformative experiences while distance running in nature, these states of attunement create the conditions for the transpersonal Self (Corbett, 1996, 2007; Vaughan, 2000) to become present. Transcending personal boundaries, she “remains an *experiencer*, distinct from what is *experienced*” (Vaughan, 2000, p. 39), aware of her own subjectivity as well as the subjectivity of the landscape, human, or animal with which she is engaged. Daniels (2005) identifies 20 aspects of the transpersonal Self in his detailed synthesis of the work of Abraham Maslow, C. G. Jung, Roberto Assagioli, Stan Grof, Sri Aurobindo, Ken Wilber, Michael Washburn, Peggy Wright, and Jorge Ferrer. Those aspects are

1. The organismic or “inner core” or Real Self.
2. Self-identification with highest values.
3. The whole psyche—conscious and unconscious.
4. The higher unconscious.

5. An archetype (inspiring, powerful, integrating, spiritual).
6. The extension or “raising” of consciousness.
7. The integration of conscious and unconscious.
8. A guiding force or organizing principle.
9. An inner unifying centre.
10. A permanent centre of Being.
11. The reincarnating psychic being.
12. A subtle self-stream.
13. The individualized divine soul (Atman).
14. The Universal Self (Atman-Brahman).
15. The Transcendent Witness.
16. No Self or One Taste (anatta).
17. The spiritual transformation of the personality.
18. The connected/permeable self.
19. The worldcentric-permeable or spiritual-permeable self.
20. The integrated, embodied spiritual life. (pp. 213-214)

I recognized in this list many aspects of the transpersonal Self described in the women’s writings, and I imagine the women in this study could identify multiple aspects of the transpersonal Self present both during their transformative experiences and in their daily lives as a result of their practice of distance running in nature. The presence of the Self suggested completion of the emotion-based transformation process delineated by Fosha and her colleagues (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), and the transformation of consciousness that tends to accompany traditional spiritual practices (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Vieten, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006), confirming that transformation was occurring in many realms during and beyond the transformative experiences.

Emotion-based transformation while distance running in nature. The four states and three state transitions of the transformational process detailed by Fosha involve movement from an initial state characterized by the emotional symptoms of stress and distress that require the creation of internal and external safety. For the women in this study, nature most often filled the dyadic role for creating safety, providing a place for women to get “in touch with body-rooted emotional experience” (2009a, p. 185) that is connected to core affective experience. As those

emotions were processed, women often experienced a breakthrough of positive emotions and bodily sensations that brought relief, clarity, restored vitality, and resilience, as conveyed by Anna: “I think it has made me more resilient, because I know I can ‘plug in’ to that feeling of interconnectedness and, really, a sense of peace through running.” During the third state the metaprocessing of, or applying mindfulness to, transformational experience generates the transformational affects attributable to mastery, the loss of self, and healing.

The women in this study had clearly engaged in metaprocessing of their experiences prior to participating, however, it appeared that writing about and making meaning of their experiences served to further secure attachment within themselves (intrapersonal attunement) and positive feelings for themselves and their experiences. The final state in this transformational process model is arrival in “core state” and “the truth sense,” which is characterized by “openness, compassion, self-compassion, wisdom, generosity, and kindness; clarity; the sense of things feeling ‘right;’ capacity to construct coherent and cohesive autobiographical narrative” (Fosha, 2009a, p. 184). Fosha described core state further.

Core state refers to an altered state of openness and contact wherein individuals are deeply in touch with essential aspects of their own experience. Experience is intense, deeply felt, unequivocal, and declarative; sensation is heightened, imagery is vivid, focus and concentration are effortless. Anxiety, shame, guilt, or defensiveness are absent; there is no pressure to speak, yet the material moves easily. Self-attunement and other-receptivity easily co-exist. Mindfulness—the capacity to take one self, one’s world, and one’s own unfolding experience as objects of awareness and reflection—prevails. (Fosha, 2009a, pp. 188-189)

Most of the transformative experiences shared in this study reflected at least momentary arrival in core state, and further writings suggested core state was sustainable beyond the experience, manifested as more continuous transpersonal traits, four of which will be described in more detail later in this chapter. These qualities of core state are “characteristic of resilient individuals and also with those cultivated by contemplative and spiritual practices—wisdom,

compassion for self and others, generosity, vibrant well-being, equanimity, confidence, creativity, naturalness, enhanced initiative and agency, a sense of the sacred, more” (Fosha, 2009a, p. 188). It appeared to me from the study findings that distance running in nature provides women access to this core state by facilitating a process of emotion-based transformation in which nature, and human and animal others, can serve as the dyadic partner contributing to the development of secure attachment within and through relationship.

This process was most acutely observable in the writings of Nicole, who was date raped in 1993 and did not run for 3 years afterward. Returning to running in 1996 helped her regain confidence lost as a result of the rape, confront anxiety, and bring balance back to her life by offering quiet, relaxing, meditative peace. The experience of encountering a fox while running in the mountains of Colorado was transformative because she was able to feel deeply connected to both herself and a beautiful wild animal that shared communication with her. Writing about her experience of being raped and her love of running and nature for this study evoked powerful healing emotion and tears at the recognition of these

two distinctly different experiences: one which made me feel insecure, alone, and untrusting of myself and of others and the other experience which produced the exact opposite effects of creating confidence and an ability to trust my instincts about people and about situations and which made me feel connected. (Nicole)

Transformations of consciousness while distance running in nature. The findings from research conducted with practitioners of traditional forms of spiritual practice through the Institute of Noetic Sciences (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007; Vietan, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006), suggested that transformative spiritual practices resulted in lasting changes within one’s self, including the restructuring of core values. The findings from this study confirm that is the case among women who practice distance running in nature for spiritual purposes. Sheryl’s words vividly described this fundamental and expansive shift within oneself.

The experience expanded my awareness of my physical presence within the local environment and within the universe. It made me feel part of something much bigger than myself, part of something that is in fact infinite. I felt connected to everything through the space, time, matter, and energy we all share.

Gillian clearly described the change in core values that took place for her as a result of her practice, as evidenced in these two excerpts.

I needed nature to find something outside of my connection with family. My connection with the natural world was unreal and spiritual, an escape from the reality of obligation. Nature allowed me to just be me and not expect anything from me at the time. Although I can now find more time to experience the natural world, there is more obligation toward this newfound relationship. I have become aware that many of the conveniences in life are detrimental to nature. Where my time and energy was completely focused on my family, I now have more time to analyze human interactions with nature. Running is a consistent reminder of the importance and beauty of all that we have in this world, the need for more people to connect with nature, and eventually seek out action that will limit our impact.

The evolution of symbiosis between humans and nature is enhanced by an experience like the one I describe. A common example of a symbiotic relationship is that of the clownfish and the sea anemone, where the clownfish is safe from predators and able to scare off the butterfly fish, which will eat a sea anemone. As we make connections with nature, we are more likely to protect our relationship with the natural world. Nature provides numerous amounts of resources for humans, if only we could focus on the ways to harvest those resources in a mutualistic way. It will take attention to detail, gratitude, and compassion to evolve toward a more symbiotic relationship, as opposed to a parasitic relationship. Running in nature is a path toward that future.

While transformative experiences may have powerfully contributed to these changes in self and values, it was the ongoing spiritual practice of distance running in nature over years that resulted in the deep levels of change evidenced in this study.

Metaphors for the process of transformation. Marie described her transformative experience of running through morning darkness into the light of dawn as “waking up after being asleep for a very long time” pointing to two classical metaphors to describe self-transformation (Metzner, 1980, 2010). However, rather than pointing simply to a metaphorical awakening of consciousness, of coming into enlightenment, her use reflects the waking and coming into light

of the lived body. She later refers to running as a process of self-realization for her, which reflects another classic metaphor of moving from illusion to realization. Metzger wrote

The most complete transformation of consciousness occurs when self-perception is altered from illusory self-images and concepts to “self-realization.” Self is then seen and experienced as the source and center of our total experience, our total world. This would seem to be the core of the Buddhist doctrine of non-self: to recognize the illusoriness of our images and concepts of self. (1980, p. 52)

What is most intriguing to me about her use of “self-realization” is that it occurs within this context: “I think running in general has been very self-actualizing and has strengthened my ties to the earth. This particular experience also tied me to my animal self as I reacted to the nature around me.” Self-actualization, then, for women who practice distance running in nature, is a letting go of the illusion that one is not of the earth, not an animal-self inhabiting a world shared with other nonhuman creatures.

As I was reading the descriptions of women’s transformative experiences I was continually struck by the ways in which the landscapes served as unnamed metaphors for the changes they were undergoing and would continue to undergo. Ascending and descending hills and mountains, descending and ascending canyons, journeying through the desert. In all of the world’s spiritual traditions there are stories of transformation occurring in these natural places, the soul undergoing transformation reflected by the landscape the body is traversing through.

Transpersonal Traits Potentiated by Distance Running in Nature

The women in this study reported many lasting changes within themselves as a result of transformative experiences, which had often occurred many years, sometimes even decades, prior to this study. This span of time was significant for me in recognizing that the continuity provided by their ongoing practice of distance running in nature allowed for the integration of these experiences into lasting transpersonal traits. Another clue was the frequency with which a

woman would report in her screening interview that she would write about one experience, maybe the most powerful one, but that I should know she had many she could share, or that this was simply one moment in an ongoing process of transformation for her. It became clear to me that the practice of distance running in nature potentiates faith, gratitude, grace, and love in a transformative experience and in a woman's life.

Faith. Through distance running in nature the women in this study were opened to reclaiming trust. They described trusting themselves, trusting their own bodies, trusting their bodies to do what was needed by the self, trusting where they needed to be and what they needed to do in a given moment, trusting friends, trusting the earth and universe, and trusting God. Anna described trusting the earth to guide her body. She wrote: "I let gravity and the trail carry me, leading my feet, resting as I wind through pines along the edge of the park." She further explained: "I was truly being carried in that moment by those earlier moment and interactions, as in a current." While distance running in nature years ago, I, too, experienced a powerful sense of trust that permeated my body to the cellular level. Eventually, I came to describe this as an experience of faith, as a deeply embodied experience of trust that preceded any belief or theology. Over the years I recognized faith as both an embodied way of being and a healing journey of learning to trust my own deepest experiences (Salzberg, 2002).

The word *faith* is derived from the Latin *fideres* which means "to trust." While faith has historically been claimed by religious traditions to refer to belief, often unquestioningly, in the doctrine and authority of that tradition, Bronheim (1998) described faith as "an essential emotional state" (p. 22) that "begins in the earliest phases of individuation" (p. 25). Smith (1998) described faith as

an orientation to the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbor, to the universe; a total response . . . a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension. (p. 12)

He conferred upon religious traditions the role of often forming and sustaining faith, however, he was clear that faith is a "characteristic quality or potentiality of human life" (p. 3) that is then expounded upon by religion. Further, Smith (1998) suggested

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event. (p. 12)

Given the strong propensity of distance running in nature to generate trust in the body and self, others, nature, and the divine, I believe it plays a vital role in the faith development of women, including Christian women (Fowler, 1995; Slee, 2004) for whom it is a spiritual practice.

Through distance running in nature a woman learns to recognize, trust, and claim her own inner spiritual authority, which is central to her development as a psychologically and spiritually mature human being.

Gratitude. Most of the women in this study described feelings of thankfulness or gratitude during their transformative experiences, and many recognized sustained gratitude as a change within them that has resulted from practicing distance running in nature. For example, gratitude or thankfulness was felt for having physical strength and power, the abilities of the human body, the current circumstances of her life, important relationships with friends or family members, gifts of nature, that God would allow access to God's mind and experience, and for life. "My body honors me and I am thankful for its strength, for its wisdom, and its ability to heal itself," wrote Bethany describing her running body. "Gratitude floods my body one deep exhalation after another," wrote Anna about descending a mountain.

Steindl-Rast (2004) described personal gratitude, or thankfulness, as “deliberate, reflective, conditional, specific” (p. 285). It is often directed toward another in acknowledgement of a particular action appreciated by the thankful person. Transpersonal or universal gratitude, or gratefulness is “spontaneous, unreflective, unconditional, universal” (p. 285), strongly volitional, and “integral to the peak experience” (p. 285). The result of transpersonal gratitude is “a willingness to open oneself to given reality, to make oneself vulnerable to say an unconditional yes to all that is” (p. 285). This description of gratitude is consistent with the experiences of gratitude among women in this study, both within the context of their transformative experiences, and daily lives, as a result of distance running in nature.

Grace. “There is no effort and I feel so alive. Grace is present,” wrote Bethany. Anna also experienced the presence of grace during her run.

I run exhilarated, steeped in a keen sense of grace, of everything unfolding perfectly, of having been so kindly and gently and firmly wrought by so many interactions into this person who I am who I love and am so grateful to be running down the mountain; this human loving running being.

Daniels (2005) identifies divine grace as an exotic, introverted, positive transformative experience, “The free bestowing by the Divine or a supernatural being of love, protection or other favours” (p. 290). If the source of grace in these experiences is God, then it is the cocreating God of ecological theology that invites Marie into transformative experience wherein she recognizes herself as a “child of the earth,” the earth that is God’s own body (McFague, 1993). It is not clear, however, that grace as experienced by these women is understood to originate from an external divine source. Woodman (1982) offers another definition of grace derived from a woman’s dream in which a central female character is described as having “Grace.” It is the act of “. . . opening herself to love, inner harmony, and the energy from her own creative depths” (Woodman, 1982, p. 70). In grace, the ego surrenders “to the gift of Grace,

or in psychological language, the establishment of a nurturing connection between conscious and unconscious” (Woodman, 1982, p. 70). Regardless of the source, whether externally or internally divine, it is possible for distance running in nature to potentiate an experience of grace for a woman that is transformative and has lasting transpersonal effects.

Love. Distance running in nature evokes life-changing compassion for, and ultimately, love of, self, other human beings, animals, and the earth. Recalling her experience of running in Yosemite Valley, Melinda wrote, “I felt such love for the woman running and the love seemed to flow between the watcher and the runner, strengthening both my ability to watch and my ability to run.” The quote from Anna in the previous section also conveys the self-love generated during a state of intrapersonal attunement: “. . . this person who I am who I love and am so grateful to be running down this mountain; this human loving running being.” For Alana, distance running in nature has contributed to her belief that “the world is a good place and people are basically good. We have to be open to love to receive it.” Her practice of running opened her to love.

Vaughan (2005) stated, “Progress on the path of love is often marked by a decrease in negative emotions such as fear, guilt and anger” (p. 97). All of the women in this study reported both a decrease in negative emotions, and an increase in positive emotions that reflected a state of intrapersonal attunement, both during transformative experiences and in their daily lives as a result of their practice of distance running in nature. These changes manifested in a deepened capacity to overcome internal barriers to, and experience, love for oneself, including the body, as well as *biophilia* (Wilson, 1984).

Wilson (1984) defined biophilia as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (p. 1) and makes the case that “to explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process in mental development” (p. 1). However, the term itself, rooted in a Greek

word for love, suggests a depth of affective and moral response to nature that is rightly called “love of life,” and was evident in women’s responses to nature as a result of their running. Their love appeared to both reflect and ignite the moral impulse to consider their human relationship with nature more deeply and respond in right relationship.

Transpersonal traits and the dimensions of the Ground in spiral theory. Love pointed me to Washburn’s (2003) spiral theory and his explication of the “four inherent dimensions of the power of the Ground” (p. 88) that may be encountered in the process of Spirit becoming transparent in adult development.

The four dimensions are these: (1) *light*: as an amplifying energy, the power of the Ground is an energy that irradiates the world and incandesces consciousness; (2) *love*: as an attracting energy, the power of the Ground is an energy that increases the attractiveness of—and thereby our attraction to—the world and other people; (3) *connection*: as both an attracting and an infusive energy, the power of the Ground is an energy that brings us into intimate contact with the world and others; and (4) *union*: as a dissolvent energy, the power of the Ground is an energy that releases us from self-boundaries and allows us to experience our underlying oneness with the world and others. (Washburn, 2003, p. 88)

The potentiating of love in the women’s transformative experiences, in combination with the likely presence of the other three dimensions during the states of attunement described earlier, suggests women in this study, for whom love becomes a sustaining trait, are coming into contact with the Ground, “the deep core of the psyche” (Washburn, 2003, p. 180), while distance running in nature. This contact is reflective of transpersonal development on the spiral path.

Distance Running in Nature as a Process of Individuation in Nature

The rhythm of the heroine’s journey. The process of individuation “is a journey of inwardness, a journey that retraces our developmental path to unconscious depths that were original sources of our existence” (Washburn, 2003, p. 55). For a woman who practices distance running in nature, individuation “aims ultimately at whole-psyche integration” (Washburn, 2003,

p. 55), and begins with an immersion into the natural rhythm of her body. The synchronization of movement and breath that generates the power to run long distances in nature allows a woman to feel her way into her own particular rhythm. It is a rhythm that arises from within the core of her body, unencumbered by equipment or technology, unrestricted by rules or walls. It is a rhythm that her well-socialized attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of others before herself has failed to allow her to sense or fully recognize before. It is a rhythm interconnected with the rhythms of nature that our eco-traumatized culture, separated so violently in body and mind from nature, has denied her the opportunity to embrace (Amorok, 2007). It is a rhythm that the woman who developed insecure attachment in childhood, whose first rhythms were formed by the inconsistent, confusing, failed, frightening, arrhythmia-inducing responses of another, may find unfamiliar. It is the rhythm that the woman who has experienced interpersonal trauma, whose body and mind have been entrained to react to the unknown, the potentially threatening, and the benign, with anxiety, fear, or terror, may at first distrust, deeply, because her internal rhythms have been subject to external forces she cannot control, even after loving people in her life responded to her needs, even when the actual or imagined threats to her safety and life were gone.

When a woman begins distance running in nature she finds her own internal rhythm dependent upon no one but her self, and becomes aware, often for the first time, of her moving body in the world. As she allows herself to feel deeply into the delight and sensuousness of her own bodily rhythms, she becomes free to become herself and during transformative experiences the transpersonal Self begins to emerge, first as a glimmer, then as a more constant companion on a journey toward individuation and the cultivation of an embodied spirituality. “Spiritual

awakening is thus an awakening and transformation of the body” (p. 149), wrote Washburn (2003).

I, and other women in this study, had been asked by friends or family members what we were running from, and, at times, claimed not to be running from something, but to be running toward something. The unconscious or conscious need to run from something—traumatic memories, intolerable emotions, a demanding job, an unsatisfying home life—may motivate a woman to begin running, but such motivations do not sustain distance running in nature as a spiritual practice. Running toward a new identity may motivate for a time, but eventually the determination to become someone new confronts the reality that ongoing spiritual practice is often uneventful and the transformation of self is an often arduous journey filled with sacrifice and loss. Like sitting meditation or any other spiritual practice, there is opportunity to use distance running in nature to avoid necessary psychological work or “escape” into mystical experience, or to strive self-righteously for enlightenment.

The journey of the women in this study, however, is not one of spiritual escape or striving. Rather it is the heroine’s journey (Murdock, 1990), a journey of descent into the unknown self, during which women’s transformative experiences while distance running in nature take place quietly within the context of daily lives and sustained relationships, fed by the rhythms of her own body moving with the rhythms of nature. Unlike the spiritual hero who leaves all worldly attachments behind to go in search of the divine, these women create time and space each day or multiple times a week, often right where they live, to engage in a practice and process of psychospiritual development that may go unnoticed except by those they are closest to or those they choose to share their journey with. Upon return, the fruits of transformation are integrated into each woman’s daily life (Schlitz, Vieten & Amorok, 2007).

Melinda described dressing up for a winter run with “no particular destination, route, or plan for how far or how long” she would be out. Those closest to her, her family, understood that she would “run away from home” every day and be changed in ways that allowed her to be “a better wife and mother.” As a young wife and mother, Frances journeyed with women friends to the Grand Canyon to complete a 44-mile rim-to-rim-to-rim run, confronting and transforming a lifetime of fear. She identified the experience, and her continued practice of distance running in nature 14 years later, as the source of her strength and power to stand as her own person within married and family life. Sheryl recognized that her commitment to a demanding job compromised her values of relationship and freedom to pursue other life pleasures like running. She chose, instead, to compromise her financial security in order to live a more authentic life. Leah recognized her dependency on others’ perceptions of her for self-worth and chose to separate from friends, give up her art, and through running moved through pain toward freedom. In a quiet moment of self-reclamation, Alana completed the longest run of her life and goes home to celebrate her body alone before picking up her children.

Two of the women in this study who reviewed the preliminary findings found it striking that over half of the women did not have children at the time of their participation, despite the fact that most were in their 30s through their 60s. In comments to me, Abigail questioned whether running has given her the inner strength to choose to question societal pressures toward motherhood. As Washburn (2003) noted, the public contribution of women to society has historically been caring for children, and has thus filled the need for “responsible action” (p. 185) in the realm of women’s identity development. This is where the Atalanta/Artemis story looms archetypally larger than life to me, as I know that my own practice of distance running in nature took root during a year in which I made deep peace with the decision to remain volitionally

childless, and later dreamed that I was called to go into a forest and create a blue circle on the ground in a sunlight clearing. At the time I interpreted the dream to mean that my work in the world was to midwife my own process of becoming a mature woman, complete unto myself, without children. “Forest clearings represent the prospect of salvation that is present within the darkness of regression in the service of transcendence, especially during its darkest initial days” (p. 189), wrote Washburn (2003). The dream likely alluded to an early transpersonal moment during a journey of descent in my own spiral, spiritual path.

The repeated choice to create space and time to differentiate themselves from others, while claiming physical space for themselves, through distance running in nature was one aspect of the individuation process present in the lives of the study participants. In that space and time there was room for a woman to ponder the truth of what she has been taught about who and what she is, to question the reality that had been told to her, to sort through her plethora of roles and responsibilities to determine which felt in harmony with the rhythm that was peeling away the layers to reveal a more authentic self.

The path of individuation is “real only if the individual is aware of it and consciously makes a living connection with it” (von Franz, 1964, p. 164). It “strips away all facades, false expectations, dead gods” (Woodman, 1990, p. 126). Over and over, the physical intensity of distance running in nature strips away what is no longer necessary, sometimes painfully so, in the journey toward the core of the Self. The women described the feeling of returning to a sense of an original or authentic self, of new found openness to themselves, others and the world, of becoming a different person, of realizing physical and mental limits they had imposed upon themselves and of moving beyond them into the unknown, of self-actualizing while

strengthening their ties to the earth, and of recognizing the sacredness of themselves and the world (Schlitz, Vieten & Amorok, 2007).

Personality and consciousness in individuation. From a Jungian perspective, individuation involves reclaiming both positive and negative projections of ourselves from others, most often a lover, recognition of those rejected and often unacceptable parts of ourselves in the shadow, and the integration of the positive masculine and feminine (von Franz, 1964). Examples of each of these aspects of the individuation process appeared in the women's writings. For Kay and others, running became the lover that reflected back the truth of her self:

I know plenty of people who are married to running. Not me. It's more like I am having an affair with running. One that I believe will last for most of my life. I can miss a run without feeling like I am betraying anyone.

Michaela's humbling encounter with the elk allowed her to recognize her tough, "narcissistic 'burly' runner girl persona" and incorporate her gentler, and more vulnerable and meditative qualities, into her personality. Gillian describes seeking a balance between running "becoming a journey or a planned for destination" that I think points to a more widespread integration of the masculine and feminine among women in the study.

While this study explored women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature, running as a sport in American culture is still dominated by competition in urban areas marked by the valuation of goals, times, personal records, the sculpting of a lean and powerful machine-body, and overall improvement and achievement for the individual runner. When many of the women in this study began running their motivations were influenced by these masculine cultural norms, as their reported reasons for starting to run confirm. Over time, and with experience, their reasons shifted toward a current relationship to running that is markedly

different, more feminine. The hallmark masculine directives, “always,” “should,” and “ought to,” are far less present in their language and psyches. Kay described this shift within her.

I can miss a run without feeling like I am betraying anyone. I have a gift for lazy, sometimes to my own dismay. I don't get up at 5 AM to run before work. I don't feel guilty if I miss a day of running. And I never, ever do more than one run a day.

The process of individuation begins with the first glimmerings of the transpersonal Self.

“The goal of human striving in the individuation process is the recognition of the Self, the regulating center of the psyche. That recognition relativizes the ego's position in the psychic structure, and initiates a dialogue between conscious and unconscious” (Woodman, 1985, p. 27). As the ego self develops, the transpersonal Self begins to appear more frequently and with more constancy as consciousness shifts.

The highly developed ego, through its transparency to itself, is able to achieve a “therapeutic split” (Engler, 1983, p. 48), becoming both subject and object, observer and observed, a witness to the dynamic flow of psychic events. This “witness consciousness” and the self-transcendence upon which it is based are also foundational ingredients of higher stages of human development. (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2010, p. 17)

Beth wrote, “At times while in the forest I feel like an observer to the world around me and other times I am part of it, just another animal doing her thing,” pointedly describing this subject/object presence during running. Melinda further described the process of subject/object consciousness coming into being while running in Yosemite.

I was at once the woman running and also the woman watching the woman running. I was the observer, the witness, the watcher, and I was observing, witnessing, watching myself running on the side of the road in my beloved Yosemite Valley. I felt such love for the woman running and the love seemed to flow between the watcher and the runner, strengthening both my ability to watch and my ability to run.

In the following description of experiencing herself as both subject and object, Aspen wrote

It's like at first I'm drifting in a large river (ordinary consciousness), but then I remember that I can sit on a ledge for moment and take a break (presence). While sitting on the ledge, I see the river passing by (it never stops, thoughts never stop), but I am present with the river and not carried away by it.

Metaphors for the process of individuation. “Enclosure, metamorphosis and emergence are natural cyclic phases in the individuation process. The psyche is like a rosebud that petal by petal unfolds into full blossom” (Woodman, 1985, p. 97). Bethany described herself following a transformative experience in the northern Arizona desert as a “blooming desert lily,” an opening, unfolding self, situated in its natural earthen place. Frances described herself, and this process, with the metaphor of a butterfly, an image used by Teresa of Avila (2007) to describe the process of the soul opening to God, and by Boudreau (2010) to convey the transformative process of running for women.

I was 28 when I ran the canyon and now I am 42 years old. I truly feel like I have transformed. Perhaps like a butterfly, I was a young pupa and now am a wonderful butterfly with wings.

Anna used images of roundness, roots, and divine feminine interconnectedness to describe being “found” during a mountain run.

Running down the mountain I feel how I have been shaped by my childhood home, a kingdom of amber woods and wandering creek, the constant, loving, selfless gift of my parents. It is a mandala, the root of my being, Ariadne’s watery thread by which I am found in my life, here on this mountainside, 16 miles in.

According to von Franz (1964), “roundness (the mandala motif), generally symbolizes a natural wholeness” (p. 234).

In dreams, the process of individuation is “frequently symbolized by the tree, whose slow powerful, involuntary growth fulfills a definite pattern” (von Franz, 1964, p. 161). Renee described an almost dream-like experience running through the flat farmland of North Dakota. She left the home of her relatives in a conflicted emotional state about their differences, and, like the individuating person coming to a cross-roads within her self, had “absolutely no idea which direction I am taking because there is no indication of sunrise, or sunset, north, or south.” Trees

planted to break the wind and prevent erosion provided some shape in the midst of flatness that “plays tricks with my normal sense of scale.” At the conclusion of the run, and later that day, she realized that she, this landscape, and these people were interconnected within her, a realization that evoked a powerful sense of belonging. Sheryl and Gillian also referenced a sense of belonging in relation to others and the world, suggesting having energetically emerged from “regression in the service of transcendence” (Washburn, 2003, p. 89) into “regeneration in Spirit” (p. 89) on the spiral path.

When asked to identify a metaphor that represented her experience, Renee wrote that “by knowing my roots, I am a stronger tree.” Metzner (2010) stated that, “The tree stands as the preeminent symbol of growth, renewal, and transformation” (p. 198). He further explained

The unfolding and growth of a tree is a metaphor for the unfolding growth of an individual, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. It is a metaphor for a process in time, a life in progress. We sense our “roots” in the past and our “crown” as our full potential future. As Jung states, “If a mandala may be described as a symbol of the Self in cross-section, the tree would represent a profile view of it: the self depicted as a process of growth.” (as cited in Metzner, 2010, p. 199)

During early transpersonal development on Washburn’s spiral path (2003), the cosmic tree “vertically intersects and thereby connects the three basic cosmic domains: underworld, earth, and heaven” (p. 52). However, as development spirals forward, the cosmic tree transformed into the domain integrating “tree of life” (p. 57) evident in mythologies around the world.

Renee, like the other women in this study, was engaged in a process of individuation, each in accordance with her own rhythm, each unfolding in accordance with the timeline determined by her Self. As a woman claims the practice of distance running in nature, as she claims space in her life, in her relationships, and works to enter fully into her own rhythm, she opens the door to a process of individuation wherein her authentic self can come out of hiding, her transpersonal Self can begin to evolve, and she can begin to embody a spirituality grounded

in her own authority, trusting in the truth of her deepest experience. As an individuating adult, she, like Melinda may discover there has been a continuity of that Self over the course of her lifetime.

Sometimes as I am running I harken back to my 7-year-old self, my 12-year-old self, my 17-year-old self and realize that all of these running selves are layers like onion skin. They are all me—they always were and always will be.

Distance Running in Nature as a Process of Self-Healing in Nature

The process of becoming whole through individuation also involves healing the self on many levels (Vaughan, 2000). Most of the women in this study described distance running in nature as being “therapeutic” for them by preventing depression, reducing or eliminating the need for medication to treat depression, feelings of emotional and physical pain, allowing them to manage anxiety and other emotions, and by providing a mental “re-set,” perspective on life, positive outlook on life, and the full experience and release of emotions. Some of the therapeutic effect was attributed to running and talking with, and listening to, friends and spouses. It was also attributed to the comforting, nurturing, rhythmic experience of running, transformative encounters with animals, and simply experiencing oneself as a human being in relationship with nature, as part of nature.

As Fosha (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) demonstrated, transformative psychotherapy involves the dyadic relational process created between therapist and patient in a safe environment, presumably indoors. In eco-therapies, the context of the relationship changes to one outdoors, in short-term or longer term natural or wilderness encounters with the therapist and often a therapeutically oriented group (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). What was striking to me was how frequently the women described experiencing the greatest therapeutic benefit alone, often within the context of the transformative experiences included in this study. Nature itself

became the healing “other” in the dyadic relationship, encountered in accordance with her particular rhythm.

However, a few of the women specifically described engaging in self-healing, or referred to their running practice as “medicine,” using language that suggested a much more potent conceptualization of their own power than what my original understanding of nature as healing “other” encompassed. Kay experienced the transformation of a fearful mind and body when she used mantra to claim her power in the world as “a highly charged energetic force” able to effect change. She wrote that “using a mantra when I run helped to heal my body and bring me peace, no doubt. And since this time, I have used running mantras to address many spiritual and emotional problems.” In her embodied writing, Bethany wrote

I am sweating and the dry desert drinks it away. I am cleansing myself; I am healing myself a little more I run and there is magic in every step. My body honors me and I am thankful for its strength, for its wisdom, and its ability to heal itself.

Bethany was one among other women who also used the word magic in reference to running, nature, or their transformative experience. Daniels (2005) defines magic as “activities in which there is an attempt to conjure and utilize unseen forces” (p. 296) usually associated with “neopaganism, occultism, theurgy, and Wicca, and witchcraft” (p. 296). None of the women who used the word magic had identified themselves religiously or spiritually in these terms, nor had any identified in their spiritual lives the influence of indigenous traditions, home of traditional shamans or medicine people. However, I imagined each woman in this study running, usually alone or with a companion dog, along trails and roads that demarcate wilderness from human community, engaged in a process of self-healing that might have implications for her community. I recalled my own dream of being in a forest clearing and then along its border with the wild forest, and then my dreaming body became vividly present on a morning run into the

center of the park near my home, as I moved to the forest edge. Slowly, I recognized that many of the women in this study were serving as their own magicians, medicine people, and shamans, and some could be functioning in such a communal role, offering healing wisdom to the world in their own unique and creative ways.

Abram (1995, 1996) provided the clearest insight into the process of self-healing that women's distance running in nature might be facilitating. Spending time with traditional magicians in Indonesia and Asia, Abram (1996) discerned that

The traditional magician cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined. Only by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization of his senses will he be able to enter into a rapport with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local landscape. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the larger, more-than-human field. (p. 9)

The woman who runs long distances in nature seems to mediate between the human and other-than-human worlds, and her embodied wisdom is located at the border of these worlds. Like the traditional medicine person, her allegiance may be “not to the human community, but to the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded” (Abram, 1995, p. 305). She derives her power to attend to her own need for self-healing from these relationships. Her role may be to act, like traditional magicians, “as an intermediary between the human collective and the larger ecological field, ensuring there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitant but from the human community back to the local Earth” (Abram, 1995, p. 304). As “the traditional shaman cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness *precisely in order to make contact with other species on their own terms*” (Abram, 2005, p. 307), she enters into attunement with herself, human others,

animals, and landscapes becoming deeply connected with the world as it is. Like the shaman, she “makes contact with the purveyors of life and health” (Abram, 1995, p. 306) by expanding her “awareness *laterally*, outward into the depths of a landscape *at once sensuous and psychological*, this living dream that we share with the soaring hawk, the spider, and the stone silently sprouting lichens on its coarse surface” (p. 306).

I noted that some women experienced God as the source of healing, aiding or bestowing healing upon them, during their transformative experiences. The response of God to Cassie’s turmoil with the gift of a rainbow offering a promise of hope was one example of this. Another was Leah’s experience of God speaking healing words to her emotional pain. For these women, activation of, and engagement in, their own self-healing was reflected in their choice to exercise their power to run, while God participated by offering healing during this process.

The water images used by many women, including flowing, currents, rivers, and sweat, also reflect the self-healing process of distance running in nature that brings them into healing contact with the deep psyche, or Dynamic Ground, along the spiral path of development.

As source of renewing life, the Dynamic Ground is also depicted by images of water. . . . In this perspective the Ground is seen as a source of water possessing both cleansing and regenerating powers. The water possesses cleansing powers because it removes the accumulated stains of life, and it possesses regenerating powers because it gives renewed health, youth, and innocence to those who partake of it. The water of regeneration in Spirit washes away taint and sin, and it heals body and soul and stimulates new growth. It is a water of both purgation and redemption. One is made new again, without either the defilements of debilities of foregone years. (Washburn, 2003, p. 57)

Distance Running in Nature as a Process of Becoming Animal (Abram, 2010) in Nature

Many of the transformative experiences that women described involved encountering a wild animal, a fox, a bobcat, an elk, a snake, a raven, big horned sheep, and bald eagles. Many of the experiences also included references to being animal-like or using animal metaphors to describe one’s self, particularly horses. On Day 2 of Nelson’s late summer multiday run she felt

as though she and other runners moving together through the Rocky Mountains “were all animals migrating to some other winter location.” When Alana runs through the forest she sometimes observes herself running and other times experiences her own subjectivity fully, as “just another animal doing her thing.” As Marie ran through the dark morning woods of Minnesota, “Instinct took over, and my feet seemed to know where the road was though my eyes did not.” She became a “child of the earth” as this experience “tied me to my animal self as I reacted to the nature around me.” Near the conclusion of her run, “Almost giddy, I charged down the hill at breakneck speed, exulting in the run like a young colt running in a field.” Describing the start of her 22-mile run out of the Grand Canyon, Frances wrote, “My girlfriends and I felt like new women and we felt like horses headed for home.” As Bethany watched runners begin the opening stretch of a relay on the Hopi reservation in northern Arizona, she felt “that complicated and overwhelming feeling that I love when I have the rare experience to see horses running.” When she began her 10 miles of the relay hours later, she became one of those horses. “I adopt a little lope, a light springy step with easy breath, I have to pace myself, slowing my breathing even though my spirit is chomping at the bit.” As Sheryl was heading home from her winter evening run, “The chilled wetness overcomes the amount of heat my body can produce though I’m now sprinting, running like a lion chasing a much needed meal.” The night after running a marathon in Phoenix, I dreamt of wild animals and domestic animals—sea lions, dogs, horses, lions, and bear—in conflict with one another or challenging me. As noted earlier, those animals were explicit representations of my own conflicted, instinctual energies surfacing.

Abram’s (2010) eloquent philosophical reflection on “becoming animal” opens with these poetic words:

Owning up to being an animal, a creature of earth. Tuning into our animal sense to the sensible terrain: blending our skin with the rain-rippled surface of rivers, mingling our

ears with the thunder and the thrumming of frogs, and our eyes with the molten gray sky. Feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place—this huge windswept body of water and stone. This vexed being in whose flesh we are entangled. Becoming earth. Becoming animals. Becoming, in this manner, fully human. (p. 3)

He reminds readers, “This animal body, for all its susceptibility and vertigo, remains the primary instrument of all our knowing, as the capricious earth remains our primary cosmos” (p. 8).

Despite what we have been taught or told, “Our animal senses are neither deceptive nor untrustworthy: they are our access to the cosmos” (p. 307).

The transformative experiences of women in this study suggest that distance running in nature serves to not only heighten the senses in a way that connects us with our animal nature, but also peels away the layers of enculturation that have separated us from our animal selves, and thus one another and the earth, to once again become what we, at the core, most truly are. This process of becoming animal (Abram, 2010) occurs through the simple act of behaving like an animal, running through nature for the sheer joy and pleasure of it, because it is what we are and what we naturally do. This process also occurs psychically as our animal instincts long repressed seek to integrate themselves into our whole being. This was evident in my postmarathon dreams and is consistent with the transformation of “integrating the inner wild animal” (p. 177) that Metzner (2010) describes as necessary.

The human and animal psyches are often dissociated and or in conflict with each other, and this dissociative condition is reflected in the abuse and exploitation of animal wildlife by “civilized” humanity. The philosophical traditions of transformation teach us that this duality must be reconciled and brought into harmonious balance, both for the sake of our own health and spiritual well-being, and for the preservation of the world of nature. (p. 177)

This process seems to parallel the transformation of the body during the transpersonal stages of development along Washburn’s (2003) spiral path. As the body begins to awaken to the “numinous core of the psyche” (p. 11), moving into “regression in the service of transcendence”

(p. 11) prior to “regeneration in Spirit” (p. 11), the depression of bodily instincts previously repressed in early childhood becomes central to the journey. “It is an awakening that progressively reveals that the power of the Ground is not inherently bestial but is rather a power that, in no way opposed to instinctuality, is itself pristinely spiritual in nature” (p. 83), writes Washburn (2003). While Washburn refers to the depression of instincts as spiritual, and Abram (2010) does not, I believe they are describing comparable processes evident in women’s transformation experiences while distance running in nature.

Women’s Soulcentric Development in Nature

The processes of individuation, self-healing, and recovering the animal self occur within nature among the women in this study. In fact, all human development occurs within nature, which led me to Plotkin (2008) for further insight. Plotkin (2008) has developed an eight stage Soulcentric Developmental Wheel that he describes as an “ecopsychology of human maturation” (p. 3). The model, or the Wheel, extends beyond current culture-based models of human development (Rogoff, 2003) by being both *eco-centric* and *soulcentric*. It is eco-centric “in that it models individual human development from the perspective of nature’s cycles, rhythms, and patterns” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 19).

First, the eight stages are arrayed around a nature-based circle (as opposed to the familiar Western timeline). Beginning and ending in the east and proceeding clockwise (which is sunwise), the stages and their attributes are based primarily on the qualities of nature found in the four seasons (east-spring, south-summer, and so on) or alternatively, the four times of day (sunrise, midday, sunset, and midnight). (p. 5)

Each stage is also characterized by developmental tasks that are nature-oriented as well as culture-oriented because, Plotkin writes, “healthy human development requires a constant balancing of the influences and demands of both nature and culture” (p. 5). For example, many of the women in this study seemed to embody the stages of “The Apprentice at the Well-Spring”

(Plotkin, 2003, p. 60) and “The Artisan in the Wild Orchard” (p. 60) characterized by collective, eco-centric identities.

The model is soulcentric in two ways: “it shows how soul attempts to guide our individual development” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 19), and “it envisions the principle goal of maturation to be the conscious discovery and embodiment of our souls” (p. 19). The soul “comes to our aid through dreams, deep emotion, love, the quiet voice of guidance, synchronicities, revelations, hunches, and visions, and at times through illness, nightmares, and terrors” (p. 19). Given our human nature, being guided by soul is being guided by nature. To deny the centrality of either soul or nature in our development is to lose our selfhood.

The Soulcentric Development Wheel is based upon the premise “that true adulthood is rooted in transpersonal experience—in a mystic affiliation with nature, experienced as a sacred calling—that is then *embodied* in soul-infused work and mature responsibilities” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 3). His view of mature adulthood contrasts significantly with that of contemporary Western and Westernized cultures, the “patho-adolescent” (Plotkin, 2008, p. 9) and “ego-centric” (p. 9) cultures that most often define maturity as hard work, achievement and economic success, consumerism, and the fulfillment of expected social roles like marriage and parenting and their practical responsibilities. In a patho-adolescent and ego-centric society, where both nature and soul have been sacrificed to early adolescent desires, self-absorption, and fantasies of heroism,

people of adult age suffer from a variety of adolescent psychopathologies—incapacitating social insecurity, identity confusion, extremely low self-esteem, few or no social skills, narcissism, relentless greed, arrested moral development, recurrent physical violence, materialistic obsessions, little or no capacity for intimacy or empathy, substance addictions, and emotional numbness. (Plotkin, 2008, p. 9)

A culture that is mature can support the development of mature humans, but an immature culture limits human development and requires individuals to work intentionally on the tasks of mature development.

It is clear that distance running in nature serves as a spiritual practice for cultivating eco-centric and soulcentric development among the women in this study. Some of the women in this study described childhood experiences in nature that influenced their adult development and spirituality and Plotkin (2009) claims that such experiences in nature and of oneself as nature are foundational for soulcentric development. When those “soulcrafting” (p. 44) opportunities have been missed in childhood, they become essential for healthy and mature adult growth, which those women who did not experience a natural childhood have created for themselves through distance running in nature.

Davis (1998) has argued that “the transpersonal elements of ecopsychology have not been clearly articulated, nor have they led to the realization of ecopsychology as a basis for spiritual practice” (p. 60). He further suggests,

What is needed is an articulation of a transpersonal view that goes beyond the nature-as-self view without invalidating it. Such a transpersonal view recognizes that both human and nature are expressions of the same ground. An understanding of unitive, nondual states, and practices for developing this understanding, are the foundations for an effective integration of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology. (pp. 7-8)

I would argue that Plotkin’s developmental theory and women’s distance running in nature as spiritual practice clearly addressed these concerns.

Embodiment, Psychospiritual Development, and Distance Running in Nature

The ways in which the women in this study described the effects of distance running in nature on their sense of being a body and understanding of embodied spirituality was indicative of the rich developmental variation among them. When beginning to compile Chapter 4 of this

study, I attempted to thematically organize the women's concluding reflections on the impact of running on their sense of being a body, and their understanding of embodiment and spirituality. The writings strongly resisted this thematic organization. I realized that their experiences of embodiment and spirituality were grounded *and* fluid, immanent *and* transcendent, characterized by mindfulness *and* bodyfulness, definitive *and* moving, canyon *and* ocean.

Like each woman moving more fully into her run, each embodied account of a transformative experience revealed a unique rhythm that I could feel in breath and sensation when reading it silently and aloud. However, I found it difficult to identify a rhythmic pattern across accounts. When I finally decided finally to "play" with one account, to attempt the creation of a visual map that might reveal an inherent structure within the experience, a flowing movement began to appear which I labeled in categories of mental activity, emotions, body sensations, and nature. I was able to track a process of shifting awareness, a rhythmic ebbing and flowing between mental and bodily awareness that helped to uncover the states of attunement explained earlier in this chapter. However, the rhythm of each woman's account was particular enough, as were her later efforts at meaning-making, that I felt unable to thematize the findings.

This resistance is precisely what a study on an embodied spiritual practice like distance running in nature might expect to find. When a woman begins to embody her self, to discover her own inner rhythm, to honor and love her particular body into the fullness of life and being, breaking free of the mind-body dualism of Western culture and spirituality that categorizes women's bodies as objects rather than subjects, she enters into a developmental spiral of her own. Because my study was not longitudinal, it was difficult to identify a uniformly applicable developmental stage with which to demarcate the embodied psychospiritual development of women who practice distance running in nature. However, much of the literature introduced in

Chapter 2 was helpful in discerning patterns that appeared in the women's writings and identify clear connections with transpersonal stages in existing theories.

As Westerners deeply influenced by the philosophical problem of mind-body dualism (Bordo, 2003; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Welton, 1999), our expression is often limited by language that does not embody either the complexity or the sensuousness of life (Abram, 1996). It was not surprising that many of the women found it difficult to conceptualize and articulate the relationship between their minds and their bodies. Some did describe them, as well as other aspects of themselves like spirit and soul, as separate from one another. Nelson wrote, "I see our bodies and our mind/soul as separate. We inhabit a body, but it isn't who we are. It takes a lot to get to this level of thinking when running." What I unexpectedly recognized in Nelson's experience, and in my own during the transformative process of this research, was that the capacity to transcend the body at times while still being connected in mind and body, is essential for healing the bodily and emotional pain caused by trauma. When one is so immersed in pain, the ability to dis-identify from the pain while still feeling through it allows for the possibility of liberation from pain (Esbjörn, 2003).

Despite this difficulty and evident dualism, all of the embodied writings revealed at least momentarily experiencing the mind and body in unity, and movement toward the mind-body integration that is fundamental to transpersonal development (Washburn, 2003). Through distance running in nature all of the women had developed awareness of a mind-body split and fluidity in relationship to it, including at least some autonomy to move and experience the body and mind as desired. Aspen described being able to move from experiencing detachment of her mind from body, to feeling reconnected with her body. Other women described degrees of awareness of the interconnection of their bodies and minds and the ways in which changes of

mind affected their bodies, and changes within or to the body affected their minds. Muriel described a capacity to shift between dominance of mind or body, and then into increased sense of unification between mind and body. With this increased fluidity within the body seemed to flow a sense of connectedness between body, mind, and spirit, and with the world through heightened sense awareness, feelings of appreciation and love of the body, and the capacity to enjoy the pleasurable sensations of the sensuous body. The metaphors women used to describe their bodies were vehicular, receptive, and sacred, recognizing their bodies as a means of moving through the world and enacting life, receiving what is present, and as sites of, or containers for, their divine feminine selves. Such powerful metaphors reflected the experienced strength and power of their bodies, as well as trust in, and love for, their bodies.

Returning to the myth of Atalanta, I recognized in each woman's past relationship to distance running in nature the development of the *competence body* on Anderson's (2008) body map that explores the body and embodiment in human development. The women in this study, like Atalanta, came to embody "mastery, skill, and competence" (p. 8) during their early running practice. As their practices deepened and transformed through degrees of individuation, healing, and connecting with their animal natures, most of the women spiraled into a new embodied stance in the world located further along Anderson's 10 axes or stages of development, which each include a return cycle for completing development of earlier stages. Beyond the *competence body* is the *compassion body*, in which the "emergence of mind-body awareness" (p. 8) is evident and the stage is characterized by "altruistic activities, reaching out in service to others, realization that life is short and that caring for others is more important than success, fame, and achievement" (p. 8). The return cycle required for movement into *compassion body* is "overcoming absorption in the Axis 5 tasks of competence, mastery, and control" (p. 8). Work

on this “transformation task” (p. 8) was evident in the many of the women’s descriptions of how their running had changed from being goal-oriented to meditative, including those of Kelly, Abigail, and Eileen.

When women’s “spiritual lives allow us to envision our place in the world as it is” (Anderson, 2008, p. 9), without seeking to “fix it” (p. 9), there is movement into the *presence body*. The embodied stance of this stage is “being in the flow and present in the moment” (p. 9) expressed through “a full and creative life” (p. 9), which was evident in many of the women’s transformative experiences and described by some as a way of being they had carried into daily life from distance running in nature. The return cycle of *presence body*, required for movement forward, involves the “transformational task” (p. 9) of “overcoming absorption in self-nurturance and belonging to anyone or anything” (p. 9) and was especially evident in the writings of Renee, Gillian, and Sheryl.

With “the development of being present and content with whatever happens” (Anderson, 2008, p. 10) and having “less concern, or even interest, in expressing one’s own voice or unique personality” (p. 10), one moves into *awareness body*. At this stage one pleasures “in life as it is” (p. 10) with an embodied stance of “fully present” (p. 10) with “spontaneous action, equanimity, and less and less effort to get things done” (p. 10). In *awareness body* there is “no progress, no up, no down, no path” (p. 10) with forward movement marked by “love and compassion” (p. 10) for the world. The transformational task of the return cycle at this stage is, “overcoming the desire for ongoing pleasure, security, and nurturance” (p. 10). I caught glimpses of the potential for the development of the *awareness body* among the women in this study, like Marie, suggesting that distance running in nature serves as a spiritual practice for embodiment until a practice may no longer be needed.

Bethany and Melinda identified the interconnection between body, mind, soul, and spirit and the ways in which each influences the other within her. Bethany wrote, “I realize as I run across the mesa that my body is the catalyst for my mind and the soul.” Melinda explained, “I believe that we are not our bodies, however our bodies are the physical manifestation of whatever it is that our spirits are creating,” pointing me back to Esbjörn’s (2003) study on body and spirit among women mystics. Her study participants traversed beyond loving the body and early transpersonal development into what she described as a dialectic of initial disidentification from the often painful material body, reidentification with a loved body, and further nondual, disidentification with the body that may represent women’s ongoing, cyclical pattern of transpersonal development. While I was unable to discern if a comparable, cyclical pattern was occurring over time among the women, it was clear that each woman was moving through a continually shifting and changing relationship with her body through distance running in nature. Women’s early motivation for and relationship to running certainly reflected degrees of disidentification from the body, often expressed as a desire to change the body’s appearance or pushing the body painfully beyond its limits for the purpose of achievement. However, the women’s descriptions of their current state of embodiment were frequently characterized by love, nonduality, expanded awareness, and change at a core or cellular level that resonated with Esbjörn’s findings despite the fact that women in my study were not self-identified mystics. Those women who experienced disengagement from the body were noticeably disturbed by it and sought to reconnect within themselves as a result of those transformative experiences.

The Embodied Spirituality of Women Who Practice Distance Running in Nature

Ultimately, embodied spirituality seeks to catalyze the emergence of complete human beings—beings who, while remaining rooted in their bodies, earth, and immanent spiritual life, have made all their attributes permeable to transcendent spiritual energies, and who cooperate in solidarity with others in the spiritual transformation of self,

community, and world. In short, a complete human being is firmly grounded in Spirit-Within, fully open to Spirit-Beyond, and in transformative communion with Spirit-in-Between. (Ferrer, 2008, p. 8)

Through the course of this study it became increasingly evident that women who engage in distance running as a spiritual practice develop, and may come to fully actualize, a recognizable embodied spirituality that is most simply represented by the term “core.” According to Ferrer (2008), “Embodied spirituality regards the body as subject, as the home of the complete human being, as a source of spiritual insight, as a microcosm of the universe and the Mystery, and as pivotal for enduring spiritual transformation” (p. 4). The written experiences and reflections of women in this study suggest that distance running in nature nurtures a woman’s body and spiritual life in this regard.

The spirituality of the women in this study, when viewed as a whole, exhibits the ten features of embodied spirituality identified by Ferrer (2008):

1. A tendency toward integration.
2. Realization through the body.
3. Awakening of the body.
4. Resacralization of sexuality and sensuous pleasure.
5. The urge to create.
6. Grounded spiritual visions.
7. In-the-world nature.
8. Resacralization of nature.
9. Social engagement.
10. Integration of matter and consciousness. (pp. 5-9)

While each woman’s personal spirituality may not yet reflect each of these features, the findings of this study suggest that distance running in nature may serve as an ongoing spiritual practice that will cultivate a fully embodied spirituality inclusive of all 10 features, and possibly revealing others.

A recurring theme in this study, “core,” suggests that the embodied spirituality of women who engage in distance running in nature provides access to, and direct experience of, what is

felt to be the core of life, which begins in direct encounter with the core of the body and psyche. Bethany described hugging into her core, “the place I know I can tap into when I am tired,” the place where solidity and strength reside. This is the place I came to call the *bodyground* during this study, the core of the embodied self, the place where the depths of the body, psyche, and essence of the self can be sensed and even touched during the most heightened state of intrapersonal attunement. It is the place from which core state (Fosha, 2009a), or the sense of truth, flows forth, and from which core values shift (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2007). It is the place from which the body can know that healing changes deep within the core of the brain are occurring. It is the place that trauma and insecure attachment can destabilize leaving the disembodied self vulnerable to psychopathology or a pervasive sense of dis-ease. It is the place that women who have not healed dare not go alone, lest they come into direct contact with their own overwhelming pain and divinity. In this embodied core spirituality, the *bodyground* is the place where one enters into direct communion, and ultimately union, with the Dynamic Ground (Washburn, 1995, 2003) and the divine Ground of Being (Tillich, 1957). The embodied spirituality of women for whom distance running in nature is a spiritual practice is often initiated by the journey of descent (Daniels, 2005; Murdock, 1990; Perera, 1981; Woodman, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1990, 1992), a journey that takes her into the depths, to the core of her being, physically, emotionally, psychically, and spirituality.

A qualitative study such as this cannot prove or disprove the occurrence of neurogenesis within the brains of women who engage in distance running as a spiritual practice and have had transformative experiences like those explored here. However, the patterns of meaning revealed by the women in this study allow for imaginative, playful consideration of the animal-based research on neurogenesis (Fabel & Kempermann, 2008; Greenwood & Fleshner, 2008; Liu et al.,

2009; Pontifex, Hillman, Fernhall, Thompson, & Valentini, 2009; van Praag, 2008) in fleshing out one last insight into the core within this embodied spirituality. In neurogenesis there is growth within the core of the brain, deep center of knowing, and in Greek mythology, “Kore” is the virgin, the maiden, “a name so widespread, that it must have been one of the earliest designations of the World Shakti or female spirit of the universe” (Walker, 1983, p. 514). So grow the amygdala and hippocampus in the depths of the brain, so grows the feminine spirit from the depths within.

Delimitations of Study

The research process I elected to use naturally limited this study. All participants in this study were solicited via Internet and all embodied writing data was collected via SurveyMonkey, a secure data collection website. Given my current rural location, and lack of time and financial resources for extensive travel to identify and interview a diverse population of participants face-to-face, the Internet was the most effective tool available for expanding and diversifying participation within my means. This approach to identifying participants and data collection may have limited participation to those with regular Internet access (possibly limiting socioeconomic diversity), who at least initially, frequented those websites where I promoted participation.

The participants and I did not develop an ongoing face-to-face relationship that might have enhanced intimacy and sharing. On the other hand, the degree of anonymity offered by email communication following the phone screen may have actually facilitated more intimate sharing. Similarly, participants did not have the opportunity to interact with other participants, as in a Focus Group study, although they did have the opportunity to review preliminary findings, which allowed for reading other women’s writings during the course of the study.

I chose to have participants use embodied writing to articulate their transformative experiences, and to respond to background and interview questions in writing as well. My intention was to ensure I collected the most embodied descriptions of their experiences as possible, and to provide participants with the opportunity to integrate their experiences and meanings attributed to those experiences while participating in the study. However, the slower, more deliberate and directed writing process may have limited spontaneous expressions and access to nonverbal cues that naturally accompany a face-to-face interview.

Limitations of Study

Like other intuitive inquiries, this study began with the subjective experience of the researcher, and explored research data through the interpretive lenses formulated by the researcher. While providing insight into depths of experiences inaccessible to other qualitative and quantitative research methods, and honestly acknowledging and seeking to effectively utilize the inherent subjectivity in the research, this subjectivity does limit the ability of the researcher to make unwavering truth claims based upon the findings, if that is what the researcher is seeking to do. I am very aware that my particular experiences and developmental level informed how I interpreted the women's experiences explored in this study. Another researcher exploring the same topic, reviewing the same data, more or less mature, may reach similar or different conclusions to those discussed in Chapter 5.

During the proposal stage of this study, I had intended to recruit participants diverse in age, ethnicity, religious background, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, parenthood and relational status, geographic location, and other unanticipated ways, to more fully represent women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature. The participants who completed the study were diverse in age, parenthood and relational status, and, to a degree,

religious background, and geographic location within the rural and suburban United States. However, all of the women who completed the study were Caucasian, and predominantly middle class and heterosexual. These commonalities may have limited the range of experiences and meanings shared.

I was acquainted with, or had briefly met in person, some of the study participants who live in my community. As a result, I was aware of having a physical sense of them that I did not have of those I communicated with exclusively by phone and email. While reading their writings, I was able to picture those I had met and recall qualities of my felt sense of them upon meeting. This may have influenced how I interpreted their writings by personalizing them more than the others. However, I was also aware of how free I felt to feel the writings of those women I had not met in person and could only imagine through their writings.

Although the purpose of this study was to explore women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development, the design of the study was not longitudinal. As a result, I was able to reflect on women's experiences in light of their memories and developmental theories, but did not have the opportunity to consider their development over an extended period of time as is possible in a longitudinal study.

Advancement of Transpersonal Psychology

As anticipated, the findings of this study expand our academic understanding of distance running in nature, spiritual practice, transformative experience, transformational processes, and women's embodiment and psychospiritual development. The identification of four states of attunement during women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature expounds upon previous understandings of intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement, and

expands the concept of attunement by adding two additional states of attunement not previously recognized in the literature, trans-species and trans-terra. The insight that nature or another human can serve as healing “other” during the transformative process expands our understanding of what constitutes a therapeutic dyad and the anticipated contexts in which emotional transformation might occur. That distance running in nature can facilitate processes of individuation, self-healing, and becoming animal (Abram, 2010) furthers our understanding of the underlying dynamics of women’s psychospiritual development from both eco-centric and soulcentric perspectives. Participants’ articulation of the relationship between both their embodiment and their spirituality broadens the comprehensive definition of embodied spirituality to include the particular core experience of women who distance run in nature.

Future Research Studies

Given the increasing cultural interest in both distance running among women and the transpersonal benefits of nontraditional forms of spiritual practice, possible related research topics are boundless. However, some observations and questions that peeked my curiosity and seem worthy of further exploration include measuring the Body Intelligence of women in this and related studies, qualitative study comparing the transformative potential of varied long distances while running in nature, cross-gender comparative studies on distance running in nature, terra-psychological studies, and consideration of the implications of this study for Christian ecological and feminist theologies.

The women in this study did not complete Anderson’s (2006) Body Intelligence Scale, and I did not consider use of it at the start. However, during the course of the study, I was struck by the likelihood that distance running in nature had contributed to the development of increased, possibly significantly, Energy Body Awareness, Comfort Body Awareness, and Inner Body

Awareness among them. Energy Body Awareness refers to “awareness of energy inside and exterior to the physical body that signals safety and support, health and well-being” (p. 363). Comfort Body Awareness refers to “feelings of comfort with one’s body and feelings of being ‘at home’ in the world” (p. 363). Inner Body Awareness refers to “awareness of minor changes inside the body and the relationship of these felt changes to external circumstances” (p. 364). All of the women appeared to demonstrate high levels of awareness in each of these areas. Future research could include administration of this scale to women for whom distance running in nature is a spiritual practice to determine if this observation is accurate, and then consider correlations between qualitative insights from this study and previous research on the psychological and spiritual benefits of distance running in nature for women.

The women in this study described experiences that occurred while running varied long distances, including distances that exceeded the marathon (26.2 miles). A qualitative study that compares the transformative potential of running longer distances in nature, including ultramarathon distances of 50 kilometers, 50 miles, and 100 miles, would provide insight into the relationship between these extraordinary distances and transformative experience that might expand upon the findings of this study.

A cross-gender comparative study of transformative experiences while distance running in nature using embodied writing and structured written interview questions as used in this study would provide insight into men’s experiences and the opportunity to explore gendered similarities and differences in transformative experiences, embodiment, psychospiritual development, and approaches to running as spiritual practice. Such a study would additionally contribute to our understandings of the construction of gender, gender identity, and the relationship between gender, psychology, and transpersonal development.

The women in this study described running in mountains and deserts, through farmlands and hill country. Future qualitative studies might consider the interrelationship between what Chalquist (2007) has named *terrapsychology*, the psychology of place or land, and the transpersonal psychology of the runner. As I was reading women's transformative experiences, I frequently recalled my own experiences of running in desert and mountains and wondered what a study solely focused on desert running or mountain running, or of running in a specific location like Death Valley or along the Pacific Crest Trail, might reveal about the terrapsychology of the place.

A number of women in the study were Christian, and, having been academically trained first as a Christian theologian, I wondered how these women's experiences might inform the development of ecological and feminist Christian theologies which use nature and women's experiences as a starting point for theological reflection. Such a study could contribute to Christian ecological and feminist understandings of the body, animals, nature, God, spiritual practice, and faith development.

Practical Applications and Implications of This Study

This study demonstrates that distance running in nature is a transformative spiritual practice for women and contributes to the formation of an embodied spirituality and women's ongoing transpersonal development. It also demonstrates that writing about personal experiences using embodied writing, and engaging in a structured reflection process about the meaning of those experiences helps to both deepen and integrate those experiences, thereby facilitating further psychological and spiritual growth. Clinicians, spiritual directors, and the women they work with who currently run will benefit significantly from understanding the transformative and healing potential of distance running in nature and developing it as a spiritual practice. It may

also be valuable for professional practitioners to create opportunities for women who run as spiritual practice to gather for mutual sharing and enrichment in a group spiritual direction, and perhaps using embodied writing as a tool for such processes.

Coda

“I run in the company of trees and of certain friends,” wrote Anna in her embodied writing. The words leapt gently out at me from the page, accompanied by an equally gentle “yes” spoken from within by my own voice, and became the subtitle of this study. This is, I believe, an apt description of distance running in nature as a spiritual practice, as experienced by the women in this study. It is simple . . . and spiritual practices *are* simple, in that they simply require a willingness to return, again and again and again, to the practice, with openness to being changed by the Mystery, to becoming a human being with the power to create change.

In the introduction, I explicitly expressed my teleological concern that all girls and women flourish, transforming and transcending any internal and external barriers to our full embodiment and psychospiritual development. I believe our flourishing has direct sociocultural and political implications, and in the process of this study, I remembered that it has direct and profound ecological implications as well. I became a witness to the power distance running in nature has, as a simple spiritual practice in the lives of these women and myself, to transform us at the core, through deepened relationship with our bodies, the earth, and other living beings, which in turn has the potential to transform the future of our planet.

As Berry (1988, 1999) foretold, the “Great Work” of our time is to ensure the future of the living earth we share, to dream, believe, and act our way toward a renewal of life guided by our careful listening to the earth’s dreaming. Our natural calling is to love our earth home, and we should, in the words of one of my own teachers, Sallie McFague (1997), “love the natural

world for its intrinsic worth, to love it, in all its differences and detail, in itself, for itself' (p. 27). The way forward in love requires us to engage in daily practices of coming back to life, so that we might recognize ourselves, and the earth, as the true lovers we are and act as such (Macy, 1991, 1998). Through the simple practice of distance running in nature, women cultivate the embodied self-love and love of nature required to transform barriers that limit our self-understanding and flourishing, and create the strength of spirit needed to become the people who might lovingly dream this new world into being. My hope is that this study has offered a glimpse, and a pathway for some, into that possibility.

As I reach the conclusion of this study, I seem to have arrived at an unexpected starting point. My initial desire to more deeply understand women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature has undergone a transformation itself, becoming now a deeply felt imperative to explicate more fully the theological and ethical implications of an embodied ecological consciousness clearly emerging from the practice of distance running in nature. The women in this study are, I believe, new spiritual teachers in an era of ecological urgency, showing us a future that begins with a nature-based spiritual practice and becomes a new way of being in which human beings relate reverentially to nature. We are wise to continue listening for what they have to teach us about who we are, and to embody that wisdom in the world.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Agreement

October 15, 2010

Dear Prospective Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in a research project that explores women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature from the perspectives of embodiment and psychospiritual development. I am a doctoral student at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, CA and this study is for my doctoral dissertation. Your participation is appreciated and valued, and will contribute to a fuller understanding of a minimally explored topic.

The invitation you received to participate in this study asked: *Have you had an experience of distance running in nature that significantly deepened or expanded your awareness of and connection to your self, others, the world, and/or the sacred, or was transformative or spiritual for you in some other life-changing way?* As a part of this study, you will be asked to complete three major steps via telephone and Internet that will require approximately 6-8 total hours of your time.

First, I will ask you to complete this consent form and the attached demographics form, and return them to me via mail or email. Upon receipt of these forms, I will schedule and conduct a screening interview via telephone to determine if you are a suitable candidate for this study. During the screening interview, I will explain the importance of resonance to this study, and will ask you to describe how the study topic resonates with your experience and why you are interested in participating in the study. Then, I will review the eligibility criteria listed on the flyer and ask you if you meet those criteria. If so, I will ask you to describe at least one experience meaningful for this study. If after review of the criteria, or upon hearing your description, it is evident that you are not a suitable participant in this study, I will inform you immediately. If you are a suitable participant, I will inform you at the conclusion of the telephone call, and invite you to confirm your participation via email by a set deadline. The telephone screening interview will take about 20 minutes.

Second, I will ask you to provide a description of your experience using embodied writing, which is a style of writing rich in emotional and sensory detail. You will receive guidelines for your writing that encourage you to write from within your own body in as concrete, specific, and detailed a way as possible. Your embodied writing will reflect your own unique experience and voice, and that is what is desired for this study.

It will likely take you 2-3 hours to write your experience in an embodied way. Once you submit your writing through the secure data collection website, SurveyMonkey, I will most likely ask you to address some questions that will allow you to enhance your writing with more detail. Revising your writing may take an additional hour. I will then edit your writing for punctuation or other minor details with the intention of preserving the expression of your experience. You will have the opportunity to approve the final draft of your writing to be used in this study.

Finally, I will ask you to respond to a series of questions in writing, through the secure data collection website, that help create a context for your experience and may take up to 1 hour to complete.

Once I receive all of the writings from all participants in this study, I will develop a series of themes or interpretations about women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature. Once those themes have been developed, I will email them to you, offering you the opportunity to provide feedback on these themes within a given timeframe. If you elect to participate in offering feedback, it will likely take an additional hour of your time. Upon completion of the study, I will email you, asking if you would like to receive a copy of the final study results.

To protect your privacy, I will not use your real name in reporting, referencing, or publishing your experience. On the attached Consent Form there is a place provided for you to identify a preferred pseudonym. If you do not identify a pseudonym, I will choose one for use in the final dissertation. Your identity and information will be kept confidential throughout this study and I will keep all print materials in a locked file cabinet.

It is my hope that participation in this research project will be personally meaningful and potentially transformative for you. The anticipated benefits of participating in the study include new insight into how your experiences of running have contributed to your personal development and psychospiritual growth. There are no anticipated physical or psychological risks for participating in this study. However, as with any form of deep self-inquiry, emotional discomfort may arise. I am always available by telephone to address any concerns you have about participating in this study, and can assist you in identifying additional professional support, including psychotherapy, if needed.

If you decide to participate in this research project, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study and for any reason, without penalty or prejudice.

Enclosed you will find a consent form requesting your signature and contact information and a form for your demographic information. Please complete these forms and mail or email them to me at one of the address provided below. You will also find examples of embodied writing, which you may keep.

If you have any questions or concerns at any point during your participation in this study you may call me at 928.606.7798 or email me at stephanie.ludwig@myitp.itp.edu. You may also contact Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D., Chairperson of my dissertation committee, at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or Fred Luskin, Ph.D, Chairperson of the ITP Ethics Committee at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. Both Dr. Anderson and Dr. Luskin may be reached via mail at ITP, 1069 East Meadow Circle, Palo Alto, CA 94303. The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology assumes no responsibility for psychological or physical injury resulting from this research.

Thank you for your interest in this research project. I hope that your participation will be meaningful for you.

I attest that I have read and understand the Introductory Letter and Consent Form and have had any questions about this research project conducted by Stephanie Ludwig answered to my satisfaction. My participation in this study is entirely voluntary and no pressure has been applied to encourage my participation. I understand that my confidentiality will be protected with use of a pseudonym. My signature below indicates my willingness to be a participant in this research project as described above, including publication of my writings submitted to the researcher as described above.

Participant's signature	Date
Participant's printed name	Preferred Pseudonym

I intend to engage in most communication via telephone and email, and gather your responses via a secure data collection website. Are you willing and able to participate using this mode of communication?

Yes or no

Participant's Email Address:

Participant's Mailing Address:

Telephone: _____

Would you like to offer feedback on preliminary findings? _____

Yes or no

Would you like to receive a summary of the research findings? _____

Yes or no

 Stephanie Ludwig, M.Div., M.A., Researcher
 Mailing address
 City, State
 (XXX)XXX-XXXX

 Date

Example of Embodied Writing

The air is cold and damp against the wet, prickly, heat of my skin as I run forward on the forest road. The soft flakes of snow landing on my bare face, hands, and legs tickle, and then almost sting, the skin exposed to wind and snow for hours on this long run. With each step my toughed layer of flesh continues to contain and protect the burning within my body that has turned me pink with heat despite the bitter cold. My thin polyester shorts and long sleeved shirt cling to the moisture pouring out of my skin, rubbing in those places where my sweat does not dry or freeze. As each foot lands on the ground I feel the stringy tissue of calf muscle tighten and release, tighten and release, growing tighter and releasing less as the timelessness passes. I shift my hat to catch sweat trying to roll down into my eyes. Salt stings delicate eye tissue already dry from the wind as the freezing air catches the opening and creeps in, bringing a momentary chill into the furnace of my chest and through my straining arms and aching legs. I pull the hat tightly down over my forehead, feeling the heat building again between the soaked hair sticking to my head and the layer of wool. I am tired. I could lie down on the dark, gravelly ground here and sleep if it were not snowing and I was not out on this forest road in shorts. As the thoughts form in my mind the internal fire slowly falters and the cold cuts through my taugth skin and moves into my bones. My layer of protection falls away and I am just cold.

Appendix B: Sample Participant Recruitment Flyer/Email

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS SOUGHT FOR A STUDY EXPLORING WOMEN'S TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES WHILE DISTANCE RUNNING IN NATURE

Have you had an experience while distance running in nature that significantly deepened or expanded your awareness of and connection to your self, others, the world, and/or the sacred, or was transformative or spiritual for you in some other life-changing way?

Do you meet the following criteria?

- Female.
- 28 years or older.
- Currently in good physical health.
- Currently experiencing illness or had recent major surgery, if the condition is not likely to interfere with their full participation in the study.
- Psychologically stable.
- Able to meet the 6-8 hour time commitment of the study.
- Able and willing to share personal experiences and communicate in writing via email.
- Willing and able to learn to use a writing approach called embodied for this study.
- Have run distances of 3.1 miles or longer, at least 3 times per week, for 2 or more years, and are currently engaged in a regular practice of distance running in nature.
- Willing to identify your running as a meditative or contemplative spiritual practice, or in some way central to your spiritual life.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact Stephanie Ludwig at

Stephanie.ludwig@myitp.itp.edu.

I am a doctoral student with the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and am conducting a study on women's transformative experiences while distance running in nature.

Appendix D: Participants' Embodied Writings

Cassie

On an early morning in mid-July, I awake before the sun, as many mornings in the past, to start my day off with a run. On this particular morning, my brain is foggy and my body desires nothing more than to stay in the comfort of my bed to catch a couple more hours of sleep. At that moment a little voice inside my head whispers, "Get up and go. You'll be glad you did." I reluctantly throw back the covers and set one foot, followed by the other on the floor. As I pull my t-shirt over my head and lace up my running shoes, my mind wanders to thoughts of all the changes life has brought in the last couple months; moving across the country with my fiancé, searching for what I want to do for a career, getting married in the next 2 months, and building a new home. I walk out the door, taking in a deep breath of the fresh morning air and take my first steps in the first light of the new dawn. The air is still, no wind this morning. The faint scent of rain fills my nostrils as I breathe in and out. I look to the northeast to catch a glimpse of the majestic San Francisco Peaks and see dark clouds looming in the distance. I think to myself, "I'm already out here, might as well continue on. It's not like I'm going to melt." The air becomes damp and cool and heightens my awareness of the sweet smell of the surrounding Ponderosa Pines. The gravel under my feet crunches and with each step I become more awake and more content to be out in the solitude of this morning. As I continue on, my thoughts take me away from my present surroundings to views of the future. "Will we be happy here in our new home?" "Will I be able to find a job?" "How will we make friends and find connections." Suddenly, as if Mother Nature knew I was in turmoil and needed calming, a light, steady rain began to fall. With the rain came more cleansing oxygen in the air and as I breathed deeper, a feeling of peace floated over me. I came back to the present and saw the dirt jump as the raindrops hit the trail. I looked up to see that south of the black rain clouds, the sun was poking up over the horizon. As I made a left turn to head back home, the morning revealed one more treasure as a vibrant double rainbow appeared in the western sky. A mixture of rain, sweat, and tears streamed down my face as I looked to the heavens and smiled. A sense of tranquility settled into my body. It was as though an enormous weight had been lifted and I was no longer running, but flying. The awe-inspiring splendor of that morning surrounded by the mountains, the rain, the sunshine and the rainbow brought with it the hope and promise that I was exactly where I was supposed to be in the world.

Kelly

It was a cold Saturday in March. The temperature was about 35 degrees. While inside my warm home, I anticipated my 10-mile run was going to be semimiserable due to the weather. At least there was a little sun peeking through the clouds. As I often did, I bundled up, laced up my running shoes, and grabbed my iPod. I placed the headphones in my ears, hoping the loud music would drown out the feeling of the utter cold that always seems to pulsate through every inch of my body when I begin my runs in the Michigan winters and springs. As I began running, my mind immediately went into positive mode. I felt extremely thankful for the sliver of sunshine, my burst of energy, and the feelings of

conquering a challenge set before me. My legs felt strong. My lungs were clear. The snow had even melted off the roads and shoulders. I began to feel like this run was going to be strong. The first four miles were normal for me. I pushed through the hills, my breathing was in rhythm, and I was enjoying listening to my new playlist. As I passed the small cemetery on my left, indicating my four-mile mark, the clouds seemed to part and the sun took over the entire sky. The wind faded while I continued my journey. I immediately thanked God for the precious gift of sunshine as I ran. I thanked Him for allowing me to be alive, and the ability to run and “reset” my life every time I did so. At this moment, I peered to my left across snow covered open fields. I began to notice nature and the environment that surrounded me. I noticed the tree lines that divided the seemingly unending cornfields. I noticed a couple of birds flying above me. The most beautiful sight was the acres of open land covered with bright, white snow reflecting the sunlight causing me to squint from the glare. I took out my ear buds. The sounds were beautiful. I heard the soles of my shoes contacting the pavement. I heard the two birds chirping. I heard the wind pick-up and die down. This felt like God’s music. To my amazement, I realized I was finding the beauty in the raw, natural state of this Earth. In that moment, my heart was overflowing with joy, peacefulness, and a thankfulness that God would allow little ol’ me a sliver of access to, maybe, understanding His view of His creation. I continued on my journey feeling light as a feather. I had a bounce in every stride I took for the remainder of my run. I thanked God for every person who shaped my life, for the life I still have to live, and for the indescribable gratitude I was feeling toward Him. I finished my run without noticing the cold temperatures, or the aches and pains in my shins that usually arise around mile eight. I also finished my run without my iPod in my ears, but I wasn’t without music; I had God’s music in my ears.

Abigail

The sun was just starting to melt slowly toward the horizon, the heat just starting to drop, and the sweat was pouring down my face, my arms, and my lower back. I turned and smiled at the girl who was matching me step for step and we just grinned at each other. Feeling connected, feeling proud of our selves, and enjoying the run. We were finishing our run, the “Dragon Fly” loop, a challenging and beautiful 12-mile route that had a significant hill each and every mile the entire course. The first and last mile were in town, but the remaining 10 miles had us running out in the country, enjoying views of lakes, a huge meadow, a rolling creek, and of tree lined and deer and pheasant filled land. We had one more hill, one that always been a challenging one for me, ahead of us. As the incline started, my quads began to ache and make noise as if asking me, “really? What more do you want from me right now?” I took a deep breath and said, “We got this one girl. One more. We can do this.” And with that, I tucked my head and kept my feet moving. I was determined to not slow my pace, and was grateful for the girl at my side whose friendship and presence was motivation to lean into myself and trust that I could. The run had started off well, and we chatted our way through our first mile, and I looked at my watch, just under a 9-minute pace. “Too fast” I said as the sweat was starting to roll, and my friend smiled, and responded, “So we should slow down.” I nodded and we kept the pace steady. We chatted our way up the first hill, and left the city, and kept on running. I remember feeling strong, in a way that I had not recognized before. I was in charge of

this run. I was in charge of how fast my legs would move, and how my body would respond to this challenge. The run was not happening to me, but I was choosing this experience. We kept talking and laughing, running by the meadow, seeing the largest Buck that I have ever seen (an 8 point) and were sharing how incredible it was that this was how we were able to spend our afternoon. Being out in nature, sweating, watching the sky turn from a brilliant blue to a soft pink around the edges, and just running. We got to the bottom of the first Dragon Fly hill. I took an internal deep breath and thought, "I can do this," and was determined to keep my legs moving. My breathing quickly became more labored, my legs were starting to ache, and I was pumping my arms and trying to stand up straight. Ever so slowly I got all the way to the top—still running. One hill down, one to go. I remember we smiled at each other as we reached the top. There was no easy conversation at this point, we both knew we had no recovery time, and the only sound was our heavy breathing, the birds signing and chirping, and our feet hitting the pavement in a steady, strong rhythm. The road became tree lined up the last hill, and I was grateful for the shade. My shirt was sticking to my body, sweat was rolling down my face, my arms, and my legs. I knew that I could do this, and that was my mantra as I step by step conquered Dragon Fly hill. I got to the top and the smile on my face was as big as the sky. I cheered. Joy, pride, and confidence shining through in that loud noise. And then I said, "Take that Dragon Fly hill—is that all you have got?" With that, we turned around and headed home. 6 hills down, 6 to go. We were flying through the miles, running faster than I would have thought prior I was capable of, and rather than questioning my ability to maintain, I trusted myself and enjoyed the run. I stopped the doubting chatter in my head. I ran. And was grateful. For what my body was showing me it was capable of. For the girl next to me who was willing to sweat and chat while offering friendship and support for a 12+ mile run at the end of a long week, for the beautiful sights we were able to take in while out on a country road. I thought. "How lucky am I to be right here right now." The run was just about done with less than a mile and a half to go, and just one more hill. This last hill had always been an easy one for me to give into my tired legs, and thirsty body, and walk up that last incline. I turned to the girl who was matching me step for step and we just grinned at each other. I felt like we were flying. There was no stopping us, and no slowing down, no matter how much my quads or lungs might want too. I took a deep breath and said, "We got this one girl. One more. We can do this." And with that, I tucked my head and ran. There was no inner negativity, no questioning my ability, just pure joy in the moment, my body, my inner power, and a feeling that I was connected to myself in a way I only experience when I run. I was connected to the girl running next to me, and to our greater community, and to the physical world in which we belong. I was learning to trust my self and my body that I do have it within my self, and I can. We crested the last hill, still at a pace that felt Olympian like in its speed, and I said in between gasps of air, "We are freaking rock stars. We are amazing, powerful, kick ass women." She grinned at me, and I knew she felt it too.

Anna

Eighteen miles. Fourteen a month ago was painful, feet aching with each pounding step. The last two miles took all my will to keep running, counting off the landmarks and the miles, then half-miles, then tenths. Sixteen I ran in a cold downpour, soaked through, my

shirt sticking to my skin, feet plodding along a sodden dirt road. Turning around at eight was a weary relief. But this morning is sunny, clear October light filtering across pines and glowing on the parked cars. Hat, sunscreen, water bottle, key, GPS. Between smearing sunscreen onto my face and stashing my key where I won't drop it, I shovel in the last bites of Cliff Bar, then set out through the park. These are the warm-up legs, the flat expanse of mesa descending to rolling dirt trails under ponderosas. I go easy: arms loose, shoulders back, finding the rhythm of my breath to match my stride. The trail climbs gently, angling across the foot of the mountain. Abruptly, the grade changes. I'm going up, climbing over roots and rocks, each step calculated, elevation earned then lost in a quick swoop, feet dancing, before plunging forward into the next pitch. I keep it slow, breath even, mindful of the climb in the next four miles. Which is not to say I do not struggle: on the steep sections I take tiny baby steps, legs leaden, lungs searing, the first waves of fatigue washing lightly past my eyes, down into the space between my shoulder blades. The grade lessens. Now, suddenly, I climb toward a green horizon line of ferns, gray exposed rocks, sky beyond, and crest a diminutive forest pass into the dry lake hills. Gratitude floods my body one deep exhalation after another. I let gravity and the trail carry me, leading my feet, resting as I wind through pines along the edge of the park. I route-find through a maze of forest roads. The hardest part is behind me. I hit the right road, turn off onto the last leg: six miles out, six miles back. It's a familiar route: I know the climbs and curves, the landmarks. I know it; I have it. The palette of the landscape has changed. The forest is somber, quiet, waiting. Limber pines have replaced ponderosa, ashen trunks silently attending my passage beneath disheveled, blued boughs. I run in the company of trees and of certain friends. Particular experiences we have shared propel me in this moment, add to the momentum of this moment: the accumulation of days together on the road, mornings shared in a kitchen, the choreography of running rapids, the long witnessing of white desert afternoons deepening to an orange horizon over the black silhouetted cliffs of an endless landscape, exchanges by which we galvanized friendships, in which we knew the world in the same way; these friends are with me as I run, so much so that I make a note to write them later to let them know how they are with me. Running down the mountain I feel how I have been shaped by my childhood home, a kingdom of amber woods and wandering creek, the constant, loving, selfless gift of my parents. It is a mandala, the root of my being, Ariadne's watery thread by which I am found in my life, here on this mountainside, 16 miles in. My strides are long. I run exhilarated, steeped in a keen sense of grace, of everything unfolding perfectly, of having been so kindly and gently and firmly wrought by so many interactions into this person who I am who I love and am so grateful to be running down the mountain; this human loving running being.

Nelson

Day 1: This is going to be a bad day I can tell already. I wait in line to be corralled, I look around, try to smile at other people, I keep my mouth shut. I drink some of my electrolyte mix in my hydration pack. The start gun goes off and I can't believe I am not in my sleeping bag right now. I start running pretty well. My body is ready from the days I've been tapering. My legs are happy. We run through town and get started on the dirt, head over a bridge and start uphill on singletrack. I know this game well. I set my pace and

glance at my heart rate monitor every so often to check myself. I pass slower people quickly and am running at a good pace. Status check: stomach is ok, burps are coming up fine, legs are fine, pace is good, I have positive thoughts, shoes feel good, nothing is tight . . . but I need to go to the bathroom. I run uphill for another 15mins or so and we hit a flat patch with walls on both sides. . . I am looking for a place with cover to pee . . . where is it? Where will I stop . . . Come on . . . I need to pee . . . Ah Ha!! I pull over to pee and lose the group of people I was running with. I make a mental note to calm down . . . finding a place to pee is nothing to worry about. Back on the run and an older man asks me where my partner is. I explain why I don't have a partner and he asks why everyone is running so fast? This is the first notion I have that I am blowing it. Another hour of running and I am hot, my stomach is really pissed off and I can't drink my electrolyte mix because it makes me burp more. I stop several times to jump up and down and "burp myself." I check the sheet in my pocket about the racecourse, check what mile I am at and realize I have another 4 miles until I reach the aid station. I walk a bit, run a bit, walk a bit, walk more. It's sandy here, hard to keep good footing. "Am I dizzy?" Status check: stomach is a mess . . . Can I puke? I am really confused and hot. I can't drink or my stomach is worse . . . I need water . . . Puking is a bad idea = less water. I'm sweating a lot. Make it to the aid station. I run awhile downhill, am feeling a bit better. Turn and scramble up some rocks. I'm on the right path I see the flags marking the way. OOOO!!! Some shade!! I sit on a rock for a while. I see some other runners, they ask if I am okay. I brush them off . . . but realize I must look bad. I check the distance to the aid station again, I drink a little electrolyte mix and my stomach churns badly. I feel the bottom of my eye. I don't have much desire to be annoyed or mad, I just need the aid station. I walk awhile I run a little. I can hear the megaphone at the aid station, I start running. I can see it!! Phew!! I am so happy to be here. An assistant asks me what I need. I tell her to dump out everything in my hydration pack and fill it with water, please. She is very kind. I eat some fruit, I drink several cups of water, dump several cups of water over myself and decide ya know . . . I could need some salt tabs?? I eat 2 salt tabs and munch more fruit. I'm still confused, I grab my hydration pack (it's very heavy) and another cup of water and start running again. I'm very grateful and feeling cooler. The next 5 miles are hard and I reach a new low. I listen to my body and don't eat any gels, but drink a lot of water. I discover that I can drain some of my water from the hydration pack into the cup and dump it over my head. I start doing this every mile on the mile. Status check: I feel like crap. I can't wait to see the finish. My stomach is cramping now. I don't remember the last several miles. I don't remember if I went uphill or downhill, I am so hot. The sun is so bright. The ground reflects some of the heat and I think the ground is against me. I realize that where I put my feet is very important. I start focusing on my feet and making good decisions on my feet. I check the map again. I check for flags, I'm on course. I play an uplifting song on my iPod. I want to see my husband. I breathe. I focus on breathing. I focus on running AND filling the cup with water. I feel the salt building up on my face, my lips are covered in spit-slime, the kind of spit-slime that is a bad sign. I'm confused again. I check the map. I watch out for animals . . . where are all the animals?? I usually see a bunch while I am running . . . I must not be being very present. Here's the next aid station!! I made it!! I see my friend! I am gonna cry . . . NO!! Don't cry, keep it in. She helps me dump water on my head. The other assistants tell her she's not supposed to do that, they could run out of water. I don't even look at

them, I have no energy to explain myself. She explains that I am her friend and I am grateful. At this moment I love her! She offers me some salt tabs, I tell her I don't know I took a few already and I can't eat anything. She convinces me to eat one. I'm on my way before I realize what's going on. I check the map, a few miles to go. I walk a little, I run a little. I'm a mess. Status check: maybe making a list will help? When I'm done I'm going to the medical tent. I'm gonna eat my almond butter and jam sandwich and I'm gonna love it. I'm hot. I dump water on my head again. My shoes are wet now. The ground is less loose. I love the ground. I'm in a tunnel . . . I remember this tunnel from the race video from last year . . . I remember seeing happy people running through it . . . there's the photographer ahead . . . smile! I didn't know the tunnels were near the end of the first day . . . God, it's only the first day. OK, gotta walk. This dirt road is slightly uphill, it's better than the loose sand right? Yes! Its better, but its uphill. . . I see partners waiting for their teammates I the sparse shade . . . are we getting close to the end?? I strain my eyes and look ahead, there's something black at the top of the hill . . . is that the finish?? Can I hear it?? Oh I would be so happy if that's the end . . . Can I hear it? I hear something . . . some one passes me, "are we near the end?" I ask. I check the map and check my mileage on my watch . . . oooo, I think it is!! I run a little, turn with the road a little, it's definitely black up there. . . I can hear it!!! OK, hold on a little longer. . . After another ½ hour I make it to the finish. I walk to the medical tent and they cover me with ice and give me water. Now I am cold. I try to talk but it is very hard. I'm annoyed at their questions. I lay down. I ask for help getting my sandwich out of my bag. I nibble on it. After about ½ hr I have eaten ½ the sandwich. I walk a little and sit in the dirt. I eat more of it. I find the line for the bus. I sit in line. I'm feeling better and start to talk to the ladies around me, none of whom I recognize. I realize my skin hurts under my arms and under my HRM. I look and see that I am chaffed and bleeding a little. I'm confused by this. This has never happened before. I am cold and shivering. I need to get back to my bag. Bus ride. Find my bag. Drag my bag. Find free tent. Open bag. Drink soymilk. Voraciously drinking my soymilk. I eat a cereal bar. I feel okay, my stomach is great. I see some friends and we exchange updates. I lie down in the sun. Need to change clothes and take a shower. I shuffle to shower tent, get in line. Get in shower. Get out of shower. Put on clothes. Shuffle back to tent. I lie down in the sun. I check the time until my massage. I have time. I feel good. I call home. Later, I get a massage. It hurts and feels good. I realize I am hungry. I eat more of my brought food. At dinner I am lucid and happy day 1 is done. I eat an insane amount of rice, meat, and avocados. I feel good.

Day 2: Today is a climb over a mountain . . . I am excited. This is my kind of day!! It's cold. I'm concerned I'll be too cold. I feel hungry. I eat a cereal bar. The gun goes off and I start running at a good clip. The ground is rough, with lots of loose rock and I can hear the ground talking to me. It says, "You are awesome at this! Push off each gnarly rock as if it is a starting block. Pick people off before the single track climb." I push faster. I find some friends as I pass people, some male friends. I know today will be a good day. I see the single track and I run all the way up to the start (lots of people are walking already). I start uphill and slow to a fast walk. I check my HRM and am happy. Status check: my stomach is great, I am warm, I have good water with me. My hiking pole is helping already and my gear is in place. My chaffed parts feel okay and I have not been passed yet. Another 15 mins into the climb and I am passed by a few men. This makes me

happy, we all seem hopeful and are enjoying the gorgeous views already even though we can't see much yet. We chat a little but breathing is too rhythmic and necessary to waste on words. A little while later and some other men pass me, one of them gives me a compliment and I give one back. The rhythm of the climb is stuck with me now, left, right, breathe with the right, push with the left. More people are passing me now. I am slowing a bit. I check out their cool hiking poles and distract myself with thoughts of home. Keeping the rhythm I see my friend, neighbor, and some times training partner, we instantly glom together and he chats with me about his partner and his trials and tribulations of yesterday. We stay together for a while and we take pictures of the view and each other and generally enjoy the company. He gives me advice and positive reinforcement and it's nice to have a temporary partner. I give him positive reinforcement for his support to his partner and we are content and happy. I feel strong and capable and am enjoying myself. The top is near and I am attached to this day. I am attached to this view. I feel like it will be a strong memory for a very long time. I almost don't want to make it to the top. I am glowing. My friend and I reach the top, we take pictures of each other. He wishes me good luck saying he is waiting for his partner and I turn and fly. I love downhill sections and over the years have improved the art of letting go, landing with light quick footsteps that react on a moment's notice to avoid falls. I am especially skilled at loose, wet, slick sections that others are scared of. This is one of those sections. My feet are flying, I am almost jumping in the rocky sections, using the hiking pole as an anchor when I slip, choosing carefully where to land and where to sway with moving rocks. I feel as if the ground is guiding my feet where to go, the ground is my number 1 fan today, helping me to reach my goals and have a successful day. I make my way quickly through an exposed section of switchbacks and now the grade becomes less steep and I see an aid station. Status check: I have plenty of water and food, I am warm, my stomach is fine, my body is fine, I don't need any thing . . . I am invincible!! Quick stop in the aid station and I see my friend again. I remember yesterday how sight of her almost made me cry and I am so excited to see her today. I shout out her name and raise both arms in a jazz hands type of wave. I am excited to share my feelings today as she asks me how I am. I think I even gave her a hug. I grabbed some snacks in one hand and keep running. Further down the mountain and I'm in the trees. The trail has shrunk into a very narrow single track, great for mountain bikes but harder on the feet. It's less rocky but more muddy now. The single track is deep too, so I have to be careful about picking up my knees to avoid brushing against the side of the track and tripping. I'm running faster in this section and slipping in the mud. I am passing people and loving it. I catch up with a man and pass him quickly, he says something apologetic but I don't even hear it. I am breathing heavy and very focused. My arms are swinging wildly as I keep my balance. I open a gel and sip on it. I turn up my music loudly and check my mileage. Doing great! Status check: I'm on the trail, I feel great, maybe a little worried about my quads and hitting too hard and destroying tomorrow's run, not hungry, still feel invincible, have lots of food and water and clothes, the weather is good. The trail goes steeply downhill again and I am reminded of a mountain bike trail in Sedona and another in Moab. Now the slippery mud on my feet is bad. I slow a little and focus on where to step again, this section is very rocky and I see a fall in my head. I'm amazing at this stuff too and try not to back off too much. I see a man ahead that I instantly want to "take down." I'm gaining on him. He feels the pressure and works harder. I see him almost fall

a few times and give him a “nice catch.” We come up on some downed trees and pick over them together. I pass him quickly after that and soon the trail smoothes to packed dirt. I slow my pace and drink some water. A section of switchbacks is next and it reminds me of some Flagstaff trails. I hear someone coming up behind me and I turn to look, it’s the photographer on a mountain bike. I pull over to let him pass. Soon enough I see him off the bike and taking pictures. I am happy because it means I am near the front pack. Status check: my quads hurt a bit, I’m 2/3 done with today’s run. I feel good if a little hungry. I am determined. I set a new rhythm on this flatter, packed single track. I plant my hiking pole with my left foot and run/pull with my right foot, land again with my left and pick up the pole, making 3 foot falls with each pole plant. I see the lake that is the hallmark of the last miles of the course and I find a new song on my iPod and glom onto it. I listen to this song a good 10 times over the next several miles. It’s the perfect rhythm and I am mesmerized by it. I’m just a few miles away now and fading a bit. I focus on keeping positive thoughts and start looking at the scenery again. I’m near an old resort town in the middle of nowhere and I take a few pictures. I walk even the little up-hills and try to pick up my old pace. I can tell I’m getting close and I feel the pressure of impending runners. I can’t fail now I’ve done so well. Status check: only a few miles left, I am on course, I drink several gulps of water, I open a gel, I have good music, keep going. Check the map of the mileage. I should be able to hear it soon. I hear the finish line and pick up the pace. I am being passed by a team of runners who podiumed last night in the masters division . . . I’m near the front pack!!! I cross the finish line and don’t recognize anyone. No one cares how well I have done. I’m a little deflated. But am so excited personally and feel great. I grab some food, sit down, and enjoy the hard won day.

Kay

Sometimes fear leads me down a deep, dark hole. One where I feel so confined that I wonder how I ever had any light of hope in my life. My breath shallows, my jaw clenches, and the part of my back, right between my shoulders get so tight that it feels like stone has replaced my muscles. And eventually, as I repeat fearful thoughts like an ugly mantra, my stomach has sharp lightening like pains. I remember the spring that I was coming to the end of my master’s degree, the mantra of fear was: I will never find a good job in Flagstaff. This statement was so weighted for me. It contained a lot of my fears; such as the fear of having to move back to a city, the fear of ending a troubled relationship, the fear of not being able to support myself, the fear of leaving the forest trails that offered me peace. Unchecked, my fear repeated the mantra, over and over, day after day and louder and louder as my graduation day approached. And my body responded as it always has; shallow breath, tight jaw, tight shoulders, pains in my stomach. I helplessly suffered. Until one beautiful day in the forest; I was running one of my favorite trails on a day full of cool air and sunshine. It was the kind of day that has the tendency to light a brightness at the center of my chest that feels like it dances into the air around me. But my body wasn’t responding in its usual way to the beauty around me. Instead it was heavy and slow and asked me to stop running. I didn’t oblige. Instead I asked why it wanted me to stop. And it told me that the weight of my fear based mantra was too heavy; too heavy to run with, too heavy to see the sunshine through. Then and

there, on my favorite trail on my favorite kind of Northern Arizona day, I decided to change the mantra. I knew I might not have the awareness I needed in my daily life, but I was sure I could incorporate this sort of awareness into running. So, I chose this mantra instead; I will find a great job in Flagstaff. I repeated it with every step. When my mind wandered, I directed it gently back to my newly chosen mantra. Immediately my body loosened up. I started feeling my breath again. And when I got home I noticed that my stomach did not hurt. I made a promise to myself to practice that mantra every time I ran for the next week. As the week went on, I noticed my shoulders and my jaw loosening. But, three runs into the practice I started to have my doubts. Will this change anything? My fear was present. At least it is making me calmer, I thought. And I promised myself I will do it for 1 week and then I can just let my mind wander again when I run. I had been home from that run for minutes before my phone rang. It was a former colleague from another city. She had a friend who was looking for a counselor at an agency she was managing in Flagstaff. Was I interested? Yes, indeed, I was. It was a well-paying job in the field I was hoping to enter. Eventually I got the job. Of course, it's difficult to determine that I did or did not get the job because of the mantra. But using a mantra when I run helped to heal my body and bring me peace, no doubt. And since this time, I have used running mantras to address many spiritual and emotional problems. When I feel unlovable; I calm myself my running with the mantra: people love me. When I feel depressed, I run with a mantra of gratitude; thanking the Universe for something or someone on each step. And when my fear comes in with its own little mantra, I recognize it and offer the counter to that during a run.

Emily

One cold, wintery day, I dug my running jacket out of the closet's far corner and slipped on my running shoes still caked with last summer's crusty mud. Rather than selecting a particular distance or time, I just started running. The sudden, rhythmic impact shocked my stiff joints and pounded my tense muscles. I carried my tight shoulders up around my ears and clenched my hands into fists. I didn't at all resemble the lithe, fluid runner 5K I had once been. Rather, I was a plodding hunchback, loudly inhaling and exhaling the near-freezing air as my feet slapped the frozen-dirt trail. I ignored the searing pain shooting through my shins. After 20 minutes, my muscles began to remember how to flex and lengthen with each stride. I stood up a bit straighter and shook out my hands. I took a deep breath and released my shoulders. I've missed how running makes me feel, I thought, and managed a little smile. I turned up a hill and pumped my arms faster to propel me up the gentle grade and along the trail marking the edge of town and start of the wilderness. The sharp scent of pine trees perked me up. My under-used ankles and knees creaked from the work of pushing against gravity and my heart pounded. I actually felt . . . great. Though I had lost weight, a heavy lump in my gut had been weighing me down for months. It occurred to me that the lump was stagnated life force, or qi, as it's called in Chinese medicine. And as my blood pumped, heart pounded and lungs expanded, the lethargy-inducing lump was lightening. For the first time since Ben's death, I was aware of my environment, and relished the cold air on my face, the forest's earthy smell and the crunching of frost under my feet. As my muscles recalled running's familiar rhythm, I found a natural pace that reminded me of the athlete—and the

woman—I had been before grief got a hold of me. Then I knew that running had the power to bring me back to life.

Nicole

Dry aspen leaves and fallen twigs crunch beneath my feet interrupting the silence. I trespass through the forest, my footprints remain in the light frost as temporary proof I passed this way. My mind swims with thoughts of work and lists I must complete. My shoulders are tense and thighs burn against the cold air as I climb the mountain. I inhale deeply filling my nose with scents of pine and earth and chilling my lungs. As I exhale the moisture from my mouth forms a dense fog that evaporates into the morning air. My shoulders drop, hands relax, and body moves into a rhythm of movement and breath. Sweat forms a mist across my body. Wind rustles the last leaves in the trees and a chill runs through me where my clothes hold moisture against my skin. I push a piece of loose, damp hair behind my ear. Sunlight splinters between the trees creating a warm smoky-looking glow and the frost fades from the trail. My mind becomes empty as I enter a trance-like repetition. I no longer hear my footsteps on the ground and I become one with the wind gently moving between Aspens and Pines and over rocks and roots. Movement in the corner of my left eye catches my attention. A fox, coat red and thick, short legs painted black, and tail tucked between his legs looks at me. I freeze in place and only my chest moves up and down. I try to quiet my breath by forcing the air through my nose. His brown eyes, outlined in black, are inquisitive and he holds my gaze as we stare at each other quietly. His chest is full and white against his auburn-red body. The bare branches above us scrape against each other in the wind, but we don't move. The wind blows my hair loose again and it slides across my face, but I don't dare touch it. His ears and nose twitch. I wonder if he smells me. "Hello." I whisper. A moment passes and his tail relaxes and drops to the ground behind him revealing interwoven colors of red and black tipped in white. Perspiration rolls down my forehead and I wipe it with my sleeve and return the loose hair behind my ear. We communicate without sound and I feel that we both understand that we will not harm each other. My breath is calm now and I shift my weight from thigh to thigh. The fox strolls a few feet away from me, his body moving effortlessly; he sits in a sunny spot and circles his tail around his legs. He takes one last look at me bidding me farewell, and lies down in the sun, curls his tail around his body like a blanket and tucks his head into it. He blends into his surroundings. I share another moment basking in the warmth of the sun and in the energy of our kindred spirits. "Have a nice day." I say feeling exhilarated and connected to everything around me. My senses are heightened and my energy is strong. The forest colors are vibrant greens and browns set against a deep blue backdrop. I hear water moving in the distance and feel the wind blowing through the trees. I know that I am part of something larger than myself and I feel a goodness that I didn't feel earlier. I am the water, the wind, the earth, and the fox. I continue up the trail without effort and energy runs through every fiber of my muscles propelling my legs forward and easing my breathing. I move back into a meditative state free of worries and completely engulfed in the moment.

Bethany

It is late summer and I am on the second mesa of the Hopi reservation. It is a very quiet early morning and I am here to run a leg of a very special race. It is the Paatuwaqatsi run or also known as the Water Is Life run. I have never been out here before; it is very stark, to the point that I cannot believe that this is a place in which people live and it is hard to shake the loneliness. The race is 30 miles on old foot-trails that connect the old villages. I am with my tribe even though I am not a Native American. There are people from all over that have come to run this race. It could be said that everyone was here for their own reasons but I feel that we are all here for some universal ones. We are here because we are spiritual, we are believers in the power of connectedness, and we all want to go deeper in the process of self-discovery. I am to run 10 miles with 2 women friends of mine. Miss Molly, who is a bright and sparkly young woman, but who runs because she so badly wants to heal her sad heart. I am with Catherine, who is not a runner but could easily run 10 miles for the sake of a spiritual experience. Before the race starts there are prayers. We pray for the earth, the water, and the life. There is talk of what it means to be of this land, to care for this land, what it means to be whole and pure. I am in awe and I can feel my cells pulsate with this purity. I have always regarded running as a pure and spiritual experience but I have never said a formal prayer or given thanks before. And I am deeply moved. We are invited, all of us, to reach into a little deerskin pouch and take some seeds to spread onto the earth and say our own personal prayers. It is such a touching and powerful gesture that I am almost moved to tears. The sun is coming up and the first batch of runners is off. I feel that overwhelming sense of melancholy that only a sunrise in the desert can invoke. Molly is first. I stand and watch her and many others run along the dirt road that will take them to the trail. Go Molly Go! I notice how beautiful she is; but then I notice how beautiful everyone is. They look like a beautiful drifting cloud as they run together over the road and into the distance. I get that complicated and overwhelming feeling that I love when I have the rare experience to see horses running. We are all very happy to be here and making friends is so easy. We climb into the back of pickups to be brought to our relay destinations and my heart swells with anticipation. I am in the desert. Rock, dry dirt, and little else surround me. There is a little bit of grass but no trees, nothing tall grows out here. I am last in our partnership and I make myself comfortable because I know it will take Catherine hours to reach me out here. I chat with my new friends. I have brought my homework with me but just being out there, quietly, seems more appropriate. The sun is soothing, yet it is very hot. Hours go by, I am getting a little anxious, feeling stagnant and getting a little worried about Catherine. I am also anxious about my own leg of the race. 10 miles is far, what will the terrain be like, am I hydrated enough? I feel the tingling of eagerness to get out there. Catherine comes and I am off! I am excited for my part of the journey. The trail is sandy and narrow and it is winding like a lovely earth colored ribbon. I am getting acquainted with my body. My lungs are strong and when I breathe I notice they can fill completely with the dry, fresh air. My shoulders are free and swing easily. I hug into my core, the place I know I can tap into when I am tired. My legs are powerful and I look down at amazement that something that belongs to me can feel so strong and so complete. There is no effort and I feel so alive. Grace is present. I adopt my little lope, a light springy step with easy breath, I have to pace myself, slow my breathing even though my spirit is chomping at the bit. I am

strong, I am relaxed and I am present, I am in this moment like there is no other moment to be had. I am eager to see where I will go. I settle in. Shortly, though, I am called to attention by an electric bolt of energy that is a rattlesnake lying on the trail sunning himself. Instinctively I jump over him and his presence excites me! I want to stop and inspect him but that is certainly not on his agenda. It makes me feel like I will be cared for and looked after in my journey here today. How rare, how special this gift of a snake, I feel blessed. I look ahead and can see the trail laid out before me for a mile or so. It is like looking into the future. I run towards it! With every step my body ebbs and flows with my surroundings; my reality, the one that I know exists melts away and my body melts into the realm of action and knowing. I will skirt this mesa and then I will climb it. I wind with this gorgeous trail; so fortunate am I to be here in this community of people that have one of the richest heritages and culture I will ever know. I climb up through the rocks. I have to stop running and climb with my hands along this cable, which will aid me in my ascent. It is hard going, it is very steep and my lungs feel like every breath weighs 25 lbs. I look up and am greatly startled again! There is a young Hopi woman waiting for me. She smiles and is there to make sure I get up to the mesa all right. And then I am on top! I am on top of the mesa and it literally feels like the top of the world. It is so amazingly beautiful up here. There are junipers and pinions. The earth is a mix of sand and smooth rock and I am gliding through the trees. My mind now drifts; it touches on thoughts and then moves on. I focus on being present because I don't want to drift this experience away I want to hold it close and dear. It is afternoon and the sun is slanting. The wind is at my back and I feel the late summer warm wind gently push me along. I am sweating and the dry desert drinks it away. I am cleansing myself; I am healing myself a little more. I pass a couple runners and I am envious of them because they are the ones who chose to run all 30 miles. I am jealous because they will have the whole experience and I will only receive a portion. I run and there is magic in every step. My body honors me and I am thankful for its strength, for its wisdom, and its ability to heal itself, I also feel the love it shows me by giving me the ability to participate in this endeavor. I realize as I run across the mesa that my body is the catalyst for my mind and the soul. I run along the old trails, with every step I am aware of its history and its sacredness. I run through the old towns and the Hopi are there to cheer us on, I run down by the wells that go deep into the earth. They have steps that lead to the water. It seems so symbolic; steps that lead down into the earth from where the Hopi people originated. I run along the old trail and history presents itself with more pottery shards than one can comprehend! I am so distracted I am constantly stopping and breaking my stride as I inspect with awe the history created by loving hands. So many questions! Who made these works of art? What were they used for? How did they get here? I am getting tired as I run these last few miles. I feel that my core is drained away, it feels watery and not at all solid anymore, and my limbs feel hollow like they are filled with air. I search within myself to find the shards of strength I know exist. I adjust my body to find a new stride. I shorten my shoulder swing, I drop my head and I hug into my core a bit more. I make a deal with my legs. I am with my body now, comforting it, coaxing as I make it this last mile. I can see the finish up ahead. I know that I will go home from this magical place transformed. Nothing will ever be the same because I have been here.

Michaela

My summer tan was gone and the skin on the front of my pale bare thighs was swollen and red from the cold, damp air. I had on shorts because it was late fall and I never wore pants to run in this time of year. In fact, I waited months for this ideal running weather. It was a little colder than I planned though. I could see my breath today. Probably a little too cold for my shorts and long sleeved tee shirt with the short sleeved tee shirt layered on top, but my ego wasn't going to allow me to put on my winter running gear just yet. Either way, this briskness kept me running. It was the kind of running weather that kept me moving. If I stopped, I would get so chilled I would start to shiver from the dampness of my sweaty under layer so I just kept moving forward along the red clay trail outside of my apartment. I was running alone. I always ran alone then. The air was crisp and quiet. And it was darker than usual on this particular run. It felt like it was later in the day, but it wasn't. It was simply colder and darker outside than it had been. As I ran along in the dusk-like conditions, I breathed out billows of white steamy air from my mouth. I could see and hear my breathing as I snapped any little twig, branch, or pine needle under my feet as I hopped over protrusions along the trail. The silence was extreme. It felt like the harder I ran or the higher I jumped, the more amplified the sounds my body created. I felt like I was the only living being on this trail as I whizzed past trees and hopped along. By this point of the run, my body had warmed up enough where I was comfortable enough to occasionally phase out my discomfort enough to let my mind wander. I recall thinking about some work I had to do when I got home and thinking about my evening plans. I remember that I thought that I did not have the time for a long run and would turn around at my usual halfway point. The halfway point of this run was marked by a vast clearing with a huge tree and a fence running perpendicular to the trail. When I would do my long run, I would shimmy my body through a small opening in the fence which connected to another trail. On days like this particular day, I used this tree, clearing, and fence as my halfway reference point where I would know to turn around. As I approached my turnaround, I was occupied with the sights and sounds of my inhaled and exhaled, my occasional thoughts, and my vacillating body temperatures. Suddenly, a chill ran through me, and I shivered, but it was not from the fact that my long sleeved white cotton base layer that was clinging to my body felt like it was lined with thawing ice cubes. I realized that this chill was caused by a loud, moaning roar followed by an unfamiliar scraping or scratching sound that seemed to echo and never stop. A shudder ran through my body and it seemed like everything around me became fuzzy. I stood silently in the clearing gazing at a brownish-black blur as it emanated its cacophony while writhing and jerking near a tree. I felt the earth jolt beneath my feet, causing my knees to buckle and my brain to simultaneously process the sights and sounds that were surrounding me. The earth felt like it had moved beneath me, knocking me off balance, ever so slightly. However, everything in that moment became crystal clear. The once blurry mass of earth tones before me became the image of an impressive male elk, gnashing its massive antlers against a tree. As I regained my balance, I had the sensation that I was miniscule. I literally felt like I was one inch tall. I recalled a painting I once saw of a man standing on the beach at nighttime, staring out into the blackness of the sea and the sky. The artist intentionally painted the onlooker about an inch tall to emphasize the sublimeness of the sea. The painter wanted to show the viewer that man is merely a part of nature. As I

stared at the massiveness of this elk and the tree and the sudden amplification of every sound of nature around me, I felt a sense of unimportance. I felt that up until that moment of my run, I had seen these trails as “mine” and that I had been “the apex” of this forest. Suddenly, “I” did not seem so important. I had a sense of total immersion and the bigness I had been feeling up until that point had shifted. I was merely a speck in these woods and sort of blindly barreled through these trails, focusing on my breath and my red, swollen skin and how cold I was. I was the man in the painting, except I was pondering the vastness of the forest before me. I felt so careless in my treatment of that trail even just on that day. It was not my forest and my red clay. They were not simply my pine needles to crush against my feet. I considered all of the times I would head out onto those trails to “clear my head” but how much was I missing of the beauty around me by focusing on myself instead of what was around me. I felt this amazing shift from “I” to “we,” i.e., the universe. On that day, I gained a heightened sense of awareness of the reciprocity and “presence” of the beauty and energy of nature. I had a spiritual experience and I don’t know that I had ever truly had one before. I felt a sudden connectedness with the world around me. I then started to worry that I might have startled that great elk. Had I affected him with my presence? Did he even notice me? Did I interfere with the flow of nature by watching him? What was he doing, anyway? Attracting a mate? My mind was bombarding itself with a stream of questions while I recall the sky seemed brighter. I have no idea how long I stood at this clearing, watching this enormous specimen, writhing and gnashing. It could have been 2 minutes. It could have been an hour. And I honestly do not recall my run home but I am quite certain it was blissful and silent.

Madeline

It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon in January, the sun was shining brightly, but there was little crisp breeze in the air that said to me, “What a GREAT day for a run.” So I gathered up all of our gear and off we went to Boulder, Colorado to run on the Mesa Trail. As we started out there were so many people, I just wanted to get by them as quickly as possible. My experience in trail running is that the farther away from the trail head the lesser the people. Brody, my Cattle dog, the best running partner I have ever had, was so happy to be there he just wanted to run and discover all of the scents of nature. As we finally escaped most of the people, I was able to get into a great running rhythm, which was a must for the steep climb we had ahead of us, but worth the sun beating down on us, sending Brody sprinting to every snow bank, to eat a few bites of snow then a roll or two, making me smile. Seeing how cute he looks and how free he feels, I begin to feel free as well and forget about the climb. As we approach the top we encounter a group of people, dodging the muddy and somewhat icy trail. Brody and I run past them as if the trail were dry. As we approach the top our speed increases, as the terrain is technical, yet gradual inclines and declines. The forest opens up and Brody is off running through it as if I am not in existence. While making sure of his safety, and trying not to take a digger, I call him, “Brods, over here,” looking around for him he is not far off. Knowing that I let him be, he sprints past me down a hill right into a slow moving creek for a drink. I take one too. I say to him, “Are you ready?” He barks and off we go. I feel as though I am running with rockets on my feet as I easily run up windy steep stairs passing people as they struggle to make the next step. Looking down to see

where Brody is I catch a man staring at my athleticism, making me feel proud of all the hard work I have done to accomplish this. I feel even more energy come through me and with the next breath I call Brody from the forest. Reaching our turn around point, I give Brody some peanut butter molasses treats for the run back, realizing I only brought food for him. I take a drink from my Camelback and say to Brody as he is crunching on his last yummy treat, “Well, at least you will have energy for the return run.” We set our pace as before our break, fast and strong, wishing there were more day light hours, to be able to run a longer run. Catching a scent, Brody dashes off into thick foliage, calling him weakens my body and I must slow my pace down as I am tripping on rocks. Running past me like a speeding bullet, I tell him to stay here. As we round a corner he dashes off again, now frustrated, and a bit angry, I call him, a hiker points to the direction he ran, slowing my pace I try to see where he may be in the forest, fearful of mountain lions in the area, I call him with fear in my voice. A couple of seconds pass feeling like they are minutes. Brody runs out of the forest. As we come to the final descent of our run, the trail is gravelly, and Brody is not liking it so much. We stop and I put his booties on his front feet. He is so funny the way he runs with those booties on his feet, I am laughing so hard I can hardly run. The harder I try not to laugh at him the harder I laugh. Pretty soon he forgot all about the booties and was running faster. I say to him, “See Brods, those aren’t so bad after all,” only to find out as we are almost to the trailhead, he lost one of his booties. Feeling tired and hungry and thinking about where it could possibly be or not, we finished our run with just one bootie.

Muriel

It’s the normal routine. The beeping of the alarm clock breaks through the barrier of sleep and arouses my conscious brain. I allow myself one last snuggle against my husband’s warm back then swing my legs over the side of the bed. I go through the routine motions of turning off the electric blanket with a quick punch of the buttons using the fingers of my right hand then apply my big toe to turn off the ultrasonic vaporizer that helps me wake up in this dry climate without scratchy eyes and dry mucous membranes. I brush my teeth in the dark because the overhead light would be just too harsh and wriggle into the running clothes I laid out last night. I drive to the meeting spot in the easy quiet of this mild late-fall morning. At this hour people aren’t late for work yet, so the vibe on the road is more relaxed than it will be 2 hours from now. The run starts like a hundred others: Right turn at the end of the driveway and through the neighborhood to the trailhead. We catch up on the trivial matters that affected us, and our families, during the days since we last talked and enjoy the feeling of the cold air entering our lungs and forming soft curls as we exhale. The clay dirt of the path has a slight crunch as we break through the crust created by the cold temperatures of the previous night. We’re the first ones on this trail this morning, a fact that makes us a little proud. The light makes the frost on the prairie grass sparkle and the peaks of the foothills in which we’re running look like a baker has daubed on a thick layer of white icing. We remark that anyone who is still in bed is missing this beautiful morning. The conversation continues easily—a topic here, a new topic there. Suddenly I realize my dear friend is crying. I ask her to stop and I wrap my arms around her. I feel her small, strong body take in and release some deep breaths. We release each other and talk—for just a moment more—about the subject

that made her upset. Then we continue on our way across the trail. I keep my eyes on the rocks in the path ahead hoping I've said the right thing to let her know she's supported and feeling glad that our run is a safe place where friends can let emotions bubble to the surface. I tuck this experience away in the place in my heart where I store what I know about this friend. This is part of our connection now and I love it.

Aspen

The trail begins at the base of a wash that is currently dry and we trudge up a small hill, my arms strain to keep Sky balanced and moving swiftly. I keep a good pace at first as the movement lulls him to sleep. We reach the flat part of the trail, having moved through some dense forest. I can feel a warm breeze touching my cheeks, although the sun is beginning to dip lower in the sky and some of the many wildflowers that speckle the land are now in shadows. I take a deep breath, setting the intention to remember my breath as often as possible. Sky is quiet now and I peek through the little window above his head and see him leaning all the way to the left most corner of the B.O.B. He is already fast asleep. I take in another breath and smell a combination of pine and flowers, sweet and musty. For a few moments I stay with my breath, observing the rise and fall of my abdomen with every step taken. I begin to consciously shift my awareness, leaving the thoughts of the day to tumble along in my mind, while observing the presence that animates each breath that I take, each step that I take. I stay with this sense of awareness as I walk along the trail and for brief moments "awareness" walks me. A cognitive shift, at first intentional, but now more involuntary, is taking place and consciousness feels like it's expanding. I sense my "I-ness" as more than this body and yet I am fully connected with my body. There is both a sense of expansion and a sense of the very minute. I feel my feet as they move: heel touching dirt, arch extending, toes now down. Then the next foot moves. It feels a little mysterious to me how this body is moving at all, but awareness maintains contact with the body and it moves steadily over the terrain. The awareness becomes more specific and now I feel the very pulse of life moving through my limbs. I feel the inner vibration/vibrancy—the life force surging through my arms, my torso, my legs, my feet, my heart, my nose, my ears Wherever I place my attention, I feel this vibrancy pulsing, moving, ever-changing. Sometimes it feels like I'm experiencing this at a cellular level and I stay with this moving, vibrating, surging sensation, but soon something else captures my attention and I'm suddenly catapulted out of the "now"—the power and vibrancy of this moment. I'm lost in thoughts—mostly mundane. What should we eat for dinner tonight? I wonder when my daughter will come home. Oh, we need food. A shopping list begins to form. A raven squawks. It has a message for me. "Wake up." Ah yes. Slowly, steadily, I pull myself with great will and difficulty from the slumber induced by my thoughts. I take notice of the trail, see the sun shining through trees, watch a hawk circle above for a moment then disappear toward the sun. Where was I? Who am I? It seems a murkiness has come over me and with great effort I try to return to my breath. I strain to push the B.O.B. over some rocks. I try to regain my sense of presence, of wonder, but my senses feel dull. I stay with this dullness for a while. What does dullness feel like? I see that it feels constricting, like there is something choking off the light of my mind. I see the yellow flowers, I feel crunchy pine needles beneath my feet, I feel a cool breeze touching my cheeks. Ah, but I am trying too

hard; trying to capture something that cannot be captured or kept. Something that's not solid, but moves continually through and within me. Flecks of sunlight come filtering through the trees. My eyes focus on them and they form a billion tiny light bursts streaming from the sun to eye. Or is my eye transmitting something to sun? Or both? The flecks of light have color and sparkle and movement. They move so fast that I cannot maintain awareness of any one spark as they zing up and down a superhighway of light toward and away from my eyes. My eyes open wider and wider. I'm aware that many would fear taking in the sun in this way, but the sun is feeding me now and there's no looking away. We dance together and it's singing its song of wonder while nourishing me on levels I don't try to understand. We commune like this for a while. Time stretches out and I don't know how long we've been dancing together, but I see that I've made the turn that will bring us back home and the sky above the tree line is beginning to turn a light shade of pink. With each step now my heart feels like it's opening wider and wider and there is some sort of bittersweet feeling. A little heartache? I can't quite identify it. Is it grief? I see the many cut trees laying down in great piles upon one another and wonder at their lives. How do the remaining trees feel? I'm moving too fast to talk with any one of them. But they stand stoically. I feel like they're watching me or at least being present with me. They are guardians of the forest, having lost so many brothers and sisters. Are they mourning too? From where does this feeling of grief come? But my walks through nature have taught me not to rack my mind for answers. The answers of my mind are too limited/limiting. There is much more to this "reality" than my mind can conceive. My heart feels like it is getting larger and larger. It's now touching each tree and almost skips a beat as joy surges through it by the mere sight of a squirrel running up a tree trunk. And there's a lizard taking in the last bits of warmth from a small rock on the side of the path. And now I can hear the chatter of the forest—the bugs zinging and clicking and communicating with each other. This forest is alive and aliveness pulses through this human body walking with the forest—I'm the part of the forest feeling itself in this way. And I stay with this feeling as it moves through my being. My heart feels like it's swelling and my senses are so alive. The smells are now more intense than I remember at the start of my walk and everything is so incredibly colorful: the sky, the flecks of sunlight, the bark on the tree that I just past. And I look again at that tree and I could have sworn I saw its needles emitting a violet light. But I can only "see" this light when I don't look directly at the needles. My mind wants to interpret this experience—give it a name—and part of me resists this naming until the desire is too strong and the name comes to my lips: "aura." I'm out of the moment. The mind has made the mysterious solid and given it a name and now I'm back to a more constricted sense of reality. I'm having trouble touching that heart space that I was just so gloriously experiencing. I make another turn in the road and consciously appreciate this magical forest, this magical world. Now I am heading for home. Sky is stirring and I turn back towards the trees. "Namaste. Thank you," I utter quietly. A tear forms in the corner of my eye. It's hard to leave this space.

Gillian

My transformation of self was feeling a sense of belonging and being a part of something bigger, which meant self-worth in my own mind and it all began when I was without

another person in the temperate rain forest of Sitka, Alaska. I didn't run with purpose at the time and yet the day included running. My most specific memory is being on a well-traveled single-track trail on a stormy day. It was an afternoon that included work, adventure, discovery, exhilaration, awe, and longing. The trail followed a creek, which turned into a river on days like these, with a slight uphill grade to the east and cut backs to the north whenever it crossed a tributary. The spruce needles and layers of decayed material that created the soil made the trail soft under foot. Roots were scarce, but mud and bogs of peat still made travel tenuous at times. I dressed well for these occasions, so there is a cozy layer of fleece around my neck and the perfect hood that allows the rain to pour over the sides and back of my head and only over the front when leaning over to observe something more closely at my feet. Heat builds up within this garb, so the 35-degree rain and wind are welcomed on my face for cooling. I don't recall what sent me up the familiar trail that day, only the point at which the wind made the trees come alive and the downpour brought the river to life brings it all back into memory. The wind pushing through 100-foot Sitka Spruce and Hemlocks created a sound that forced itself through the pattering of rain on my hooded raincoat, while the velocity of the water built pressure in the river, creating a rushing sound of urgency. It became nature's concert of rhythms that exhilarated me into a moment where every sense was a heightened awareness of how euphoric I felt to be part of this natural world. One moment I was still and the next running back down the trail. Running with the wind and the sounds of the storm was an experience unlike any other. I was the storm and like the wind flowed through the trees, keeping up with the rush of the water. Stopping to catch my breath, I listened as the rain and my breath slowed in harmony. You wouldn't think there would be an animal in sight with the way the rain was pouring down. Yet, there was a raven caught up in the excitement with me. She seemed to have been chasing me and as I stopped chattered at me as ravens often do. We cocked our heads at each other as if asking to continue. The storm was calming, as did our pace down the path. She followed me to where the trail crossed under a road and into the more urban part of the park. I am guessing she returned upstream, where the winds create a playground in the forest. I continued my trip to the estuary, which was flooded with the incoming tide. The feeling of connectedness with the natural world changed from that moment forward. Although my view of the natural world was always with detail and attention, I was more a part of that world than ever before.

Sheryl

It's evening in late fall, and I leave the house to head over to Schultz Creek trail for an after work run. I start along the Pipeline Road. Its gravel crunches under my shoes. I can feel the crushed rocks' rough edges and angles poking at the soles of my feet through my shoes' cushioning. I wonder glumly if I've overdressed again. It always feels so cold in the shaded entry at my front door. I often find myself feeling too warm after running a short way and stripping off layers before I even get to the actual trailhead. I always wear too much, I think. Why don't I figure it out and dress more lightly when I leave the house? Even this train of thought is repetitious. This is what I always do, and then this is what I always think. I unzip my windbreaker and resolve to think of it no more. The cool air embraces me around the middle, slipping immediately in through my jacket's open

front. Scattered clouds, low and gray, are starting to gather, but blue sky is still visible between them. The blue is deepening as the sun begins to sink towards the horizon. The sun is at my back now. I don't see it, just its effects on the sky and the long shadow it casts before me. The wind swirls and gusts lightly, stinging my reddening face. I reach the trailhead and pass beneath the ponderosa pine bough that shades the trail just past the fence. It's just low enough, and I'm just tall enough. Over the years, I've created a small, short ritual. As I run beneath the bough, I draw myself up as straight as possible to let the pine's needles brush the top of my hat. It's always here and with this motion that I leave the road and enter the forest, both physically and mentally. This trail is an old friend, the route on which I started running regularly about 10 years ago. It has changed over the years, as have I. The dirt is packed firm but feels soft beneath my feet. I'm warming up and starting to find my rhythm. I scan the middle distance, looking between the widely spaced pines for the rarely glimpsed elk or jackrabbit. Tonight, I see no animals on the ground, but the birds call from the trees. The flicker calls out with its half whistle, half screech. Western bluebirds swoop and flutter from pine to pine, their bright blue bodies and rusty breasts familiar and beloved since I was a child, visiting my grandparents in Colorado from the Maryland suburb where I grew up. Memories from childhood mix with those I've made on this very trail. But here is the trail. As I get deeper into the forest, it demands more of my attention. Smooth, sandy stretches alternate with rocky reaches and dry stream crossings. There hasn't been any snow that has stuck yet this season, but the ground is damp. The dirt is fragrant—earthy. I can smell the richness of rotting leaves. It's occasionally tinged with the sharp scent of pine. I'm fully warmed up now. The aches and tight spots have faded and I'm running strong and smoothly. My attention is more fully on the path just ahead and where I should put my feet. Should I negotiate this bit with short, quick steps or take a couple longer, leaping strides to get over this rock, that root? The air is taking on that golden evening hue. The clouds are getting thicker, but they reflect the low sun's light and make everything, the ponderosa's red-yellow bark and silver-green needles, the dark gray rocks on the hill's steep slope and the dried grasses and flowers covering the ground in the valley bottom, glow gold. The beauty of it, the knowledge that I, too, am immersed in this glorious golden light fills me with energy and I just want to run and run, to breathe in this beautiful air, to feel my body's heat radiating away and feel the cool touch of the air brushing my cheeks. The air feels like snow, now. The cool moistness makes the air soft. I love snow and am excited. This may be the first storm to really stick and leave the ground covered in a soft, white wintery blanket. This may be my last run on this trail that isn't hampered and slowed by snow stamped to icy patches by the many feet that pass over it. I greet the rockier stretches with glee, challenging myself to negotiate the loose rock, the stony obstacles and boulders quicker, faster, more efficiently. The golden air gets richer with a rosy reddish hue. Soon, very soon, I've got to turn around or I'll be caught out after dark. Snow begins to fall in big, crystal flakes, and I can't put it off any longer. I've got to turn back or I'll be walking through the dark over the rough trail to get home. I turn around and pick up speed for the trip back down the valley. I imagine myself as water, flowing, pulled by gravity's undeniable force down the trail, over and around the rocks. All of my attention is focused on the trail, my eyes dart all over the ground before me, looking for the best route. My breath comes hard, but the cool air is like pure energy entering my lungs to infuse every muscle. The valley is in shadow now. The sun has dropped behind

the western ridge, and the air around me is no longer golden and rosy, but grayish with the coming dark. Light still reflects from the clouds overhead, but it's getting dimmer. The snow falls thicker now. The ground is covered with a thin, white tissue of angular snowflakes. I push the pace, my breath streaming white smoke. Soon I won't be able to see the rocks and roots and will be forced to slow down. I won't let it happen! I race the sun itself. I'm aware of the earth beneath my feet turning at a rate I can see and feel as the light fades from the world. It is an amazing thing, that this planet, my planet, so huge I can hardly imagine its size, is spinning in the empty space of an immensely larger universe and I can feel the rate of its turning. I can race it. The snow sticks to my gloves. It melts through my hat, soaking it. The chilled wetness overcomes the amount of heat my body can produce though I'm now sprinting, running like a lion chasing a much needed meal. The light gets ever dimmer. My shadow has disappeared into the coming dark by the time I arrive at the parking lot. Breathing hard, body and mind cleansed by the cold air rushing through my lungs and into my blood, I reach the packed dirt parking lot and pass through the fence and begin to walk. I'm close to home. The rest of the way is on smoothly laid gravel or pavement. I turn back in the dark and return to that pine bough over the trail just beyond the fence to complete my ritual. Standing on tiptoe, I touch my head to the needles. A clump of snow slides off and I get a collar full of freezing flakes. I laugh. So, the world can also play! I walk the rest of the way home.

Leah

It was early Saturday morning and I was rushing to get to Apex, what has become one of my favorite Open Space trails to run close to home. My closest friend of 20 years was flying in later that morning to visit me for the weekend. It was going to be a good Labor Day Weekend. As I was driving down 6th Avenue toward Golden in the early dawn, the drizzle quickly turned into a downpour and I began to hydroplane. My heart sank. If it was this rainy at trailhead, this was not going to be a fun run. I really needed to get this run in for the upcoming race the following weekend. I got to the trailhead a few minutes later. As I sat in my car contemplating what kind of jacket and layers to wear, I realized the rain had tapered back to a gentle drizzle. The clouds were really low. I couldn't even see the top of the first hill that began the ascent into the canyon of the trail. It was dreary and gray. Really gray. So much for summer, it seemed like the onset of fall happened over night. This was my mindset on this morning before I began running my 6 1/2 mile loop. I was rushed, excited with the anticipation of getting to the airport on time, sad that summer had seemed to end overnight. I was not excited about the dreary way the day was beginning. Not sure of conditions with the rain. Antsy; I'm always antsy before my run; I fidget a lot, I can't sit still. I always have to get coffee for my early runs. I finally decided on my outer layers. I stopped fiddling with external layers and slipped my water bottle on my hand. I set my watch timer, slipped my car keys under my front tire, and started the slow jog to the trailhead. Today was a "no iPod day." I needed to get my head together and decided I needed the peace of no electronic stimuli, deciding instead to listening to silence and sound of the small creek that ran through Apex Canyon. As I ran the first 1/4 mile from the parking lot to the trailhead my head started to clear, and the rain practically stopped. The clouds were still low, but the sun was breaking through and the heat difference was significant. I immediately regretted wearing my waterproof outer layer. It

wasn't very breathable, and I was already breaking a sweat. I could smell the sage and the smells the rain had brought out in the valley. I started to breathe deeply. I tried to keep the focus on my feet placement, watching the wet rocks and the mud. My mind began to settle immediately. No matter how hard I tried to avoid it, I kept hyperventilating. I tried to slow my breathing, but ended up just choking back a sob. Not sure why I was on the verge of tears, I tried to focus on my jumbled week. It had been a really busy week getting ready to have company. There was big drama in my family. Fighting with my brother. My race the following week was big. I was the team captain of a 10-person team for a 24-hour race. Lots of logistics. Lots of details. Lots of details, which make me very nervous. I hate being in charge of so many things that I could fail at in front of so many people. I hate failing. I hate it. God, I cried, I hate being so vulnerable. I hate it. Just then, I was rounding the first switchback on "Pick and Sledge," my trail of choice today for the sheer height that it would allow me to reach. Climbing each 25-50 yard switchback was hard. It was muddy, rocky, and technical. But, God had my attention. As the mist of the clouds surrounded me and encased me, I could only see as far as the hillside on the other side of the creek. My normal view of Golden to the North or Green Mountain to the East was completely obscured by the clouds. The brightness of being in a cloud, but not having direct sunlight was blinding. I did not wear sunglasses. As I rounded another Eastern switch back, I broke through the clouds, and all I could see was the unearth-like view of the smooth, wave-like clouds at my feet. I had to stop. It was breathtaking; the shrubs along the path were starting to turn red. I remember thinking how red they looked against a white mist. Beautiful. Suddenly, I could see downtown Denver. I was bathed in sunlight. It was so bright. My mind was filled with the song that is taken from Isaiah 6:1: "I see the Lord" . . . and "I see the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe, filling the temple with His glory" (NAS translation). I couldn't remember the exact words, but through my mind the same part of the song kept going through my head as my eyes welled up and I finally cried as I heard God say to me, "no eye has seen the Glory of the Lord, Leah. But My Glory is like this; and you were here in this valley, in this small place to witness a small bit of my beauty. You are important to me, no matter if you fail or not." I'm reading the 3-6 verses in their text now as I write this, and I realize what a blessing God was placing over my worries and me: "And [the seraphim] called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holly, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (vs. 3). "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven" (vs. 6-7).

Frances

The new day had just begun when my girlfriends and I jumped [into] the pick-up truck and headed to the south rim of the Grand Canyon. We had our packs ready and our shoes were new and ready for the 44-mile adventure across the canyon and back in 1 day. Yes, that is right, we ran and hiked 44 miles in one day starting at 2 a.m. and finishing that same day at 6:30 p.m. I was extremely nervous, not quite sure what to expect but I knew if I put one foot in front of the other I could do it. I still felt doubt as we took our first steps into the dark abyss. The only light we could see as we ventured toward our first

destination was the light from the north rim and from the full moon. My anxiety came over me and I actually got giddy and started to giggle. The laughter was a sure sign that I didn't know what I was getting myself into. We reached Phantom Ranch around 5 a.m. The downhill was slower than we had anticipated because we didn't want to trip and sail over the edge and become a statistic. I thought deeply about my young children snuggled in their beds all warm and cozy. Why am I out here in the middle of the night scrambling around in the canyon? This is a question I have asked myself and been asked by others. The answer is simple: there is no better feeling than pushing your body to pure exhaustion. The mind and the spirit are really in control. The minute I start to doubt my body it starts to give into my doubts and I feel every single ache and pain in my body. My spirit is truly what leads my physical self. The body is just a vessel in which my soul uses to reach its desires. I truthfully have to admit that I did not nourish my body correctly from the beginning of the run. As the sun began to make its way into the depths of the canyon walls I began to mentally tire. I made it out to the north side but I am not quite sure how. My legs ached and cramped with charley horses to the point that I did not think I could take another step. My eyes and heart were full of emotion and great doubt that I might not make it back. I still had 22 miles left. Remembering that the hardest part was the steep incline of the north Kaibab trail. Fortunately we were able to rest and fuel our bodies with food. Food, wonderful food. When the body is exerted past its normal capacity it craves any energy it can get. I inhaled a soda in 5 seconds and ate literally 1200 calories in a short period of time. As the food began to enter into my blood stream my mind became clear and I regained the ability to think. Yes, think! My girlfriends and I felt like new women and we felt like horses headed for home. The weather had turned from windy to slight rain but now the sky was slightly overcast with perfect temps to run. My downhill legs were soooooo happy after my hamstrings pushed me up 14 miles with the last 6 of the 14 straight up the sandstone and limestone walls of the Grand Canyon. After six miles of constant chatter amongst ourselves since we could now talk due to running downhill and fuel we came upon a Park Ranger. He informed us that we may have been the last people to see a hiker alive. Wow! Did we ever perk up. He asked us questions about hikers we had seen and to think about the man and the person he might have been hiking with. They expected foul play. You want to know what kind of emotion I felt . . . stunned, worried, sad, invigorated, and cautious. For the next 10 miles my brain was constantly thinking what the man was wearing. Were we really the last people to see him alive? And then we had to retrace our steps and run over the spot where the dead man had laid on the trail just hours earlier. Right then I felt such a feeling of gratitude to be alive. To feel my heart pumping blood to my legs so I could run yes run. I truly felt quite insignificant in this place called the Grand Canyon where not all that step into it may step out. I clung to the presence of my God and the friends that ran along side me. By the time we finished running along the Bright Angel Creek weaving along the trail we finally reached Phantom Ranch for the second time that day. Truthfully my body was FINISHED! I could not let my mind be tired too. We ate again. Eating now was a job. In order to get through the day we ate like we were on a road trip and had to stop often to get gas. We headed out of the ranch towards our last push to the top, our destination. As we pushed forward one foot in front of the other the skies began to change. The weather around the canyon can change from soldering heat to absolute cold. As we began our incline the most glorious big horned sheep stood up on this huge point looking down at

us. I felt the power of God in that moment. My clothes were wet with perspiration, my feet ached. I couldn't even tell the color of my shoes anymore they were the color of the red earth we ran upon. And in that moment when the sheep stood before us I felt joy. Joy like no other. I knew then that in my small world there was a higher power that gave me a feeling of hope, peace, and love. My self my body my spirit and my soul has never been the same. I crave and search for that moment everyday when I put my running shoes on. I hope that today I will find that sense of peace I felt in the canyon. What an amazing gift. People ask, why do you run long and hard? Because I know what some will never know that when I run I will feel yes feel. I run because I want to feel . . . joy, love, hope, pain, desire. Whew! Running in nature gives me no greater joy. As we began our last five miles to the top, a huge absolutely freezing storm came over us. Talk about feel, I couldn't feel anything. My hands were ice. They became so cold that they ached with agonizing pain. We stopped in the last bathroom to put every ounce of clothes we had with us on our bodies and ventured back out. By this time I once again had used up all my fuel. I literally scarfed down a huge candy bar and my body used it in minutes. This last five miles of the hike was the hardest. We could have been hiking Everest. The puddles were so deep that we had to step up two feet each step . . . not even exaggerating. I knew the only way out was up. No one but myself was going to get ME out of this hole called the Grand Canyon. I emphasize this because no one should ever take it for granite . . . hehe! Respect is what I always think when I think of the canyon. Once I stop respecting it I might never make it back out. Every single step took effort. My mind started to waiver and I started to weave. It took every ounce of effort for every single step to the very last one. Once we reached the top the entire area was covered in frozen ice. I had never seen anything like it. Every branch on every juniper and pine tree was ice. We had to walk another mile to our truck. I started to cry. The pure exhaustion of the whole 16 and half hours had taken a toll on my whole self. I had run and hiked 44 miles and now I didn't know if I could walk 1 more mile. Not only gone 44 miles but in the Grand Canyon. Once we climbed into our pick-up we turned the heat on as hot as it would go and relished in the glory of being warm.

Renee

We, my blood family and I, have very little common ground. I wake up, not particularly early, as I've never been a morning person. The weather is grey and bitter cold. It has been storming, which normally makes me happy, but I am disappointed because I really wanted to view the night sky again from a far northern latitude. I put on my layers of running clothes (I am well-prepared because this is how I remember running in North Dakota while in college). My jacket is raspberry in color. I step out of the farmhouse, and I'm hit with the sharpness of the North. It is not snowing or sleeting, but there is moisture in the air, and it is frozen. The biting wind strikes me with tiny particles of airborne ice like micro daggers. My breath is taken away from me, but I feel exhilarated. My strides quickly begin to warm me, but the landscape is so incredibly cold. The sky is flat low and grey, the earth and its black fertile soil with rows of bright green young winter wheat, passes into my field of view with a steady rhythm. I can see so far! The flat straight gravel road I am on stretches on and on to a horizon that never ends. It loudly crunches below me with my every step as it is covered with a thin layer of hoarfrost. I have

absolutely no idea which direction I am going because there is no indication of sunrise, or sunset, north or south. My nose hairs fuse together as my breath freezes as it leaves me. It must be around 0 in October, a cold snap. The landscape is pierced with rows of skeletal popular trees that are planted to act as wind blocks to prevent soil erosion. These regular plantings run parallel and perpendicular to the road I am on, and define the regular shape of the fields, either left barren after the summer harvest, or planted with winter wheat. The strong steady wind almost takes my feet out from under me, and I wonder what it would look like here without the wind blocks. After 2 miles, I come to the intersection. Right? Left? Straight ahead? Does it matter? I turn into the wind, the front of my legs sting when confronted with a wall of frigid steady air, and I pull the sleeves of my jacket over my gloved hands for added protection. I'll run up to that bunch of trees up ahead that I know hides a homestead. Get myself a peek into rural history, asbestos shingles and toppling over barns that reveal black iron machinery. Tools of another time. I have no idea how far away that bunch of trees is. The flatness of everything plays tricks with my normal sense of scale. My only indication is the regularity of the road intersections and the rows of poplars. The wind finally begins to push me back to Lawrence and Donna's farmhouse. Back to what I understand, even though I am not understood. I imagine them watching my raspberry jacket against the grey wintery sky, progressing back to the hearth and warmth of home. They are wondering who I am and how did I get that way. As I approach the house, I find I remember that house, how it sits on the homestead, there's Uncle Eddie's house that is abandoned now, and there's the old threshing machine that I used to climb around on and pretend to drive. This landscape and these people are part of me, part of the fiber that makes me who I am, no matter how differently I live now, and how my views have evolved, this is where I started. I realize I am finishing the most beautiful and the most powerful run I have ever been on. Later on that day, we visit the site of my dad's first schoolhouse. The building is gone, but the setting is unaltered. We find part of the school's foundation, and my father begins to tell us stories from deep in his memory of his early days. Stories we have never heard before. I belong.

Alana

I arise slowly; this is the day I will run the farthest I have ever run. I am apprehensive. I always run my long runs alone. No distractions or worrying about other people. It is me, my dog, and the distance. First step, motivate myself to get up out of bed. Bagels and peanut butter, my food. I lube my feet, fill my camel pack and store the goo. My family knows this is a big day for me. We all are singing Queens, "I am a Champion, no time for losers." The only line my kids know to that song. I hum that song off and on all day. Husband is off to work and my oldest child is dropped at school. Now I drive my youngest to my best friend's house for the morning. He runs right in. I don't sit. Feeling if I stay I will never leave. My friend wishes me luck but I can tell she is glad it isn't her. I enjoy the drive across town to Olds Munds Highway. Park at Jackson's Grill and start. It is cold and windy. My body feels stiff and the ground is hard. Every step I take is jarring. I head under the tunnel and have a foreboding thought. I am out here alone, the forest seems menacing. Why do I do this? Jasper my pup is full of energy. She is off leash running and chasing, sniffing and leaping. Her joy is infectious. I can feel my body warming up. My movements are more relaxed. I am not pounding the earth but am a part

of it. I feel the strength in my body. I have prepared for this run and it is fun. I pass hunters camping off the side of the road and think, I bet they wish they could run like this. Running is all I am doing and all I have ever done. This run will never end. I am at peace. My pace is easy. I run 20 minutes and walk 2. I am fixated on my watch at times. But I am amazed at how fast the 20 minutes go by and how enjoyable the 2 minute walks are. I am running an out and back course. My heart rate is slow and steady, but I can feel the fatigue in my legs and upper body. The terrain is hilly. My shins and knees ache on the down hills but the steep up hills tax my body more. My spirit feels deflated as I struggle up the hills. I want to walk but will not. The clock tells me when to walk not my body. The deeper I go on this dirt road the more anxious I feel. Will I recognize my turn around point? Did I miss it? My watch tells me I should turn around soon. Jasper my pooch loves this day. Freedom! There is the culvert and bridge! Relief, excitement. I made it to the turnaround point. I laugh for the pure joy of recognizing the spot and making it there. I turn around, not stopping. My dog stops, looks at me questioningly and watches me head back. She follows slowly as to say, "Oh, is that as far as we are going?" "I have run 10 ten miles and all my next steps will be getting me closer to my goal. Each step I take feels triumphant. I am a winner. All the scenery is recognizable to me. I remember old grandfather trees and say good morning. But I never stop. Keep going. I watch the clock. Walk, run, run, run, walk. I am connected to my watch. It gives me control over my fatigue. Every 20 minutes I walk and drink, and every hour I eat goo. Oh my god does that sticky sweet glop taste delicious. Coffee flavor, chocolate flavor, I want more. But what do I do with these stupid little sticky packages. They annoy me, wishing I could just watch them flutter in the wind. But I know I would never litter. I am exhausted. Why am I doing this? It is eternal. Just keep going. Passing the hunters again. They smile and wave, but I don't feel excited any more. Will this ever end? Blisters are forming. Think of something else. I am running down a long slight hill into a marshy area where Jasper is lapping up the water. I smile while I watch her pure joy. I look up and I am amazed. There soaring above her are 4 bald eagles. The dog sees them and puts up a chase. The eagles swoop and dive. I stop even though it is not time to walk. I push the stop button on my watch. I must have a correct time for this run. I think I need to stop and watch this. But if I stop I may never get going again. I stop. But I don't just stop. I lay down in the middle of the road to watch this display. Animals connecting. I feel the pure joy of myself not only witnessing this pantomime but being a part of it. I feel the joy of my dog running and jumping and the eagles' joy in the ability to fly and play. I do not know how long I lay there. I left when the eagles left. Even though they interacted with my dog, I felt they knew I was there and we were all celebrating our life that day. The sun was warm on my face. My breathing was relaxed and it felt extremely good to just stop moving. There was more to this day than running. I was not running away from things or life, but I was running to experience life. I was content. This is my life. I saw myself interconnected to my family, friends, and the natural world. I was a part of something grand. I got up off the cold ground. My knees still ached, my feet had blisters and I was now chilled but I would finish. I ran past the familiar scenery knowing I was getting closer and closer to my goal. Under the tunnel I went. So close, but feeling so tired. All I wanted was to celebrate in the fact that I had run this far, but I was still running. Until I wasn't. I'm done! I collapsed at the cattle guard. Hugged my dog and screamed, "I did it, I did it I did it!" . . . After my 20 mile run I did not immediately pick

up my son, but went home. I showered and lay on my bed naked looking at my body, my blistered feet and sore, sore body. I am proud of what that body did. And I thanked it for giving me the gift of completing this run and experiencing today.

Melinda

I recall the sound of the river and the smell of the wood smoke like it was yesterday. Suiting up for a winter run in Yosemite Valley, I had no particular destination, route, or even plan for how far or how long I'd be gone. But my family was used to that. For some reason, no one was overly concerned when I was out for a couple of hours—I always came back more relaxed and mellower than when I set out. I needed to run, and those who were closest to me understood that though I would “run away from home” everyday (and sometimes twice a day) I always came back. Happier. Saner. A better wife and mother. And so this Yosemite run began as so many other runs—with the need to burn off the intensity and minor stresses of my day. The snow was falling in big flakes, the kind of big flakes that my mother-in-law always said portended the end of the storm. The smaller flakes had piled up on the road to a depth of 6 inches or so, and these larger cousins weren't adding that much to the total. It was manageable in running shoes with waterproof socks, so I left the snow shoes behind. Within a mile I had the road to myself as I left the lights of the lodge behind. Though it was only 2pm, the dark of winter wrapped the valley in a premature evening. I was well-dressed and comfortable in the dark and the cold, though my breath told me that the temperature had dropped since morning. I've never been plagued by cold lungs or throat—and this was no exception. Running in the cold thrills me. The fat, slow flakes and the fog from the river put me squarely in the center of my very own snow globe. I was the merry figure encased in glass and time stood still. My winter running legs were strong—running to keep my body warm. My hands quickly grew hot and I stashed my mittens in the waistband of my tights. I could feel the amazing sensation of my body regulating my temperature as I found just the perfect pace to keep me not-too-warm and not-too-cold. And it was at this pace that I lost myself. I have never been able to meditate the usual way. I have not found the key to sitting quietly and stilling my mind. The more I am still in body, the more I am active in mind! Perhaps it was being in my own personal snow globe that did it, but at mile 4 something happened. I was at once the woman running and also the woman watching the woman running. I was the observer, the witness, the watcher, and I was observing, witnessing, watching myself running on the side of the road in my beloved Yosemite Valley. I felt such love for the woman running and the love seemed to flow between the watcher and the runner, strengthening both my ability to watch and my ability to run. It felt a bit like a circuit—each feeding the other. Tears flowed down my face, hot against my ruddy cheeks. Tears of release. Tears of happiness. Tears instead of sweat for the hard work my body was doing at my bidding. Seeing the bobcat at that moment sealed the deal for me. That particular sighting rendered me emotionally full—I recall feeling the spine thrill followed by an all-encompassing “knowing” that I was part of everything around me . . . trees, rocks, bobcat. This was a special and spiritual moment and I marked the sighting of the cat as my turn around point. As I turned to travel back to the lights of the Valley where my family waited patiently for me, a different feeling enveloped me. The snow had stopped and the clouds moved swiftly across the late

afternoon sky. At that moment, as in so many other running moments, I felt lucky. Lucky for being able to move my body and still my mind. Lucky for seeing the details of nature that others routinely miss. Lucky for having a healthy outlet to burn off energy. My snow globe-bobcat run remains one of the running highlights in my 30 year running history. It was the run that connected me to the elusive feeling of connectedness to the universe. The tears were my way of acknowledging the gift. And I still cry whenever I see a snow globe. Or a bobcat.

Eileen

Running through the muddy trails at Huntsville State Park this muggy, warm Saturday had been more successful than I had hoped. I was about 4 miles from finishing a 15.5-mile race at this state park outside of Houston, Texas. Although the air was heavy and the humidity clung to my clothes like a tired infant, my legs pumped up and down the hills and through the single track trails with an unbridled enthusiasm. I could feel my heart beating like a drum, and every breath I took seemed to pierce my lungs like a wooden spike. My quads felt like iron weights as I struggled to keep pace and not trip on the tree roots popping out everywhere. How I dreaded this long arduous run to the last aid station until the finish. It was a 4.5-mile jaunt that seemed to drag on like a boring math class. Other runners would pass me with an individual burst of energy—they, too wanted to end this, only to have me pass them with my own energy boost. Comments were traded as we passed one another regarding how this part of the course was especially tortuous today because the Texas humidity was at, well, a typical Texas high. A male runner brushed by me, his pungent perspiration making contact with my skin and giving me a strange shiver. His body odor hanging in the thick air for a couple of minutes gave me a brief wave of nausea. Miles and Josh, my two friends were about 4 paces ahead of me when Miles, exclaimed, “Finally, we’re here. Get your fluid. Let’s go.” I quickly grabbed a waxy cup of water, drank a few sips, had a couple of swigs of my luscious, sweet Blueberry Pomegranate GU, and took off after Miles and Josh. The sweet taste lingered in my mouth as I ran from the aid station. Only 2.8 miles to go. I’d set a PR! My heart soared with pride! All of the hard work would pay off! As I settled into my finish line fantasy, I made a conscious decision to distract myself. I would be running hard the last part of this race. Oh! How I dread the feeling of near nausea, my head spinning, my mind screaming when I push my body to its physical limits. I want to slow down, but I cannot. Pray the Rosary, distract yourself, calm down, I scolded myself. Don’t give in to your weakness. Keep up with Miles and Josh. OK, I settle in to the rhythmic, meditative prayers of the rosary. I am calm. I am running. I don’t feel my body. I don’t hurt. I am no longer feeling the clammy air, I no longer feel my heart pounding. I am merely running, staring at the ground, making sure I don’t stumble on one of those tree roots that pop out of the ground without warning. I remain calm, I feel a floating sensation, but don’t acknowledge it consciously. I just run. The dank smelly earth and fallen leaves that followed me with their moldy odor now have no scent. The air feels cool on my perspiration-drenched singlet, and I feel drops of sweat on my stomach. It feels nice. Like a cool sprinkler on a hot summer afternoon. I just run. I just run. I look up. I am on the long wooden bridge that covers the ponds. What? I ran through these already. I know that there is only one stretch of these in the park—and I have run over them already. I stare at the white

inviting lily pads and my heart picks up the beat, faster and faster. Other runners are running toward me. No! My voice screams suddenly inside my head and in a panic I ask a trio of female runners—something—I don't even remember. I must have looked scary—they just ignored me and ran on. This is a dream, I comforted myself. No, this is not real. The weather is different in your dream. It's sunny now. When you started, it was foggy. Runners always help one another—these ignored you. Got to be a dream, no a nightmare. An older man runs toward me. Where are you going? I ask. Are you running the 50-miler? He looks at me, and calmly says, "you went the wrong way. You have to turn around." I look at him in disbelief and turn around, tears welling up in my eyes with the realization of what had happened. Yes, I went the wrong way. I ran 18.5 miles that day, rather than 15.5. I was devastated and the pain I felt stayed with me a while. I actually questioned my faith. How could God do that? For Pete's sake, I was praying the rosary!

Carolina

The wind awoke me frequently from my sleep that early Saturday morning. I glanced at the clock and counted down the time before the alarm would intrude on my sleep to begin my day. I am spoiled. My husband brings me my coffee every morning and today is no exception. I enjoy the way it soothes my throat as I stay covered in my bed reading my book and sipping my cup with my down comforter wrapped around my legs. My phone vibrates interrupting my reading and I immediately know who is sending me a text so early in the morning. G., my friend that I introduced to trail running a couple of years ago will be on the end of the text. Her message is predictable— Too cold. Too windy. I think I will pass today. I think she may be on to something smart until my husband walks in the room to ask me if it is a two or three shirt day. He will not accept my excuse to stay home, and I would feel guilty if I stayed behind. Why should I be the only woman to run today? I send a quick reply to G.—No wimping out. Pick you up in 30 minutes. No excuses. We travel to our favorite meeting place appropriately named Hardtimes Trailhead to join another friend while our two dogs excitedly pace in the back of the car. I wish I could feel that excited early on a cold winter morning with a temperature of 24 degrees. We stretch and analyze as usual if we have dressed appropriately for the conditions. There is an inch of snow remaining on the ground, and the wind is blowing. As we start out on the trail we grunt and moan all the while complaining of our aches, pains, and stiffness. We ask why we are doing this when sane people are home drinking coffee feeling warm and dry. I always enjoy the conversations of our small Saturday group as we share our trail running passion. This particular day we are not as talkative and spread out a bit along the trail as we try to get into our running rhythm. I enjoy running alone so I can empty my mind of all the stresses and fears that consume my thoughts these days. I begin to feel the tightness in my left ankle from an injury a few weeks past, and I focus on each step. I try to plant my foot just right to see if I can work the stiffness from it and make this nagging problem go away. We begin our climb up Boyd's Branch with all conversation reduced to short words and grunts. I realize that this is a two-shirt day as I feel the sweat slowly running down the center of my chest and my breathing becoming more labored. I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. My mantra is running over in my mind: steady, strong, safe, splendid. This hill is a bear, and I begin

to think that I would like to cut this run short and take the single track back to the car. I know G. will agree. We are a team. Softly, something magical happens. As we approach our meeting spot it begins to snow big fat flakes. I can feel the cool soothing flakes on my hot cheeks; they rest on my eyelashes and hang on the brim of my cap. The dogs begin to jump and chase as the snow begins to fall faster and heavier. It is beautiful, and we all join together with a renewed excitement to our run and to our conversation. We are running long. The vistas where we can see mountaintops for miles are now so thick with snow and clouds that all our familiar long-range views are a blur of winter white. The quiet of the snow is a welcome silence. We make the first fresh footsteps in the snow and are proud that they are ours. The thought of shortening our run disappears from my mind as we begin to marvel at the incredible beauty of this most spectacular snowfall. G. once again thanks me for encouraging her to come out in the cold. I know that what we are in the midst of is a gift, one that those in their warm homes will not see, feel, or share. We all continue to comfortably run in the soft snow finishing our run with joy in our hearts. Sore ankle gone and breathing easy, I thank God for the time I share with my friends each and every time we venture out together on the trails. Today may be snow, tomorrow a gentle rain, and the future a brilliant fall season of color, all a splendid gift from God. Simply splendid.

Marie

Riding the school bus in the predawn darkness to the start of the first leg of the 100K Edmund Fitzgerald Team Relay, I felt miserable and cold. It had rained all night on the roof of our 1940s motel room as I lay sleepless in bed, fussing over what clothes to wear. It continued to rain as my buddy drove me to the bus stop in Beaver Bay on Lake Superior's North Shore. I sat numbly on the bus, surrounded by runners whose initial burst of conversation drifted into silence as we all contemplated the miles ahead. We would begin the relay with our 20K leg, hand off to a teammate, and then spend the rest of the day in smug delight that our part in this drama was done. First, though, we had to run. We had to run through the rain, darkness, wind, and cold that this October day was sure to bring. We had to run our best. We used the Porta-Potties, tilting crazily toward the rushing torrent of water the roadside ditch had become, then returned to the warmth of the bus to await the start. I patted my jacket pocket to feel the GU packet pinned there, pulled on my hat, looked at my watch, and waited. Jeez, I thought, my shoes are already wet! Just before 6:30 a.m., the starter waved at us, and we tumbled out of the bus. I couldn't believe it. The rain had stopped, and in its place there was the utter darkness of the northern Minnesota wilderness, unsullied by so much as a porch light. In the lights of the school bus, the reflective slashes on the other runners fluoresced brilliantly. The report of the pistol sent us off. I trotted along with the other runners for as long as I could, but soon was alone, some ahead of me and some far behind. The inky blackness of the morning made it impossible even to see my watch. Instinct took over, and my feet seemed to know where the road was, though my eyes did not. In time, I began to see colors no person confined to home, car, and freeway would ever see. It occurred to me gradually that the road had taken on a charcoal tone. The trees were the deepest purple, and the sky was an impenetrable navy blue. I ran lightly, easily, knowing exactly where I was, running toward the opening in the trees ahead. It was impossible to know if I was

seeing or sensing the environment around me. And then it began. Slowly, exquisitely, one pixel of light at a time, it began. The sky lightened first, almost imperceptibly. Then I was able to see the white lines on the road, glowing faintly. The trees seemed darker at first, but soon began to show more details. I could make out branches and leaves. I was warmed by the sun rising off my left shoulder, still wrapped in early morning clouds and fog. I became acutely aware of my surroundings. I started to pick up speed. The road wound up and down, and at the top of a hill opened to a vista of incredible beauty. The endless living forest of the Sawtooth Mountains stretched out for miles before me. The trees were not the brilliant Crayola colors of a calendar. They were muted to pastel orange, gold, yellow, olive, and taupe. Far in the distance, swathed in haze, was the great lake itself. I took in a quick breath at the sight. Almost giddy, I charged down the hill at break neck speed, exulting in the run like a young colt running in a field. I felt at one with the universe, excited and blessed to have the ability to do this. I ran under a railroad bridge, down a short steep hill, and handed the baton to my teammate. "Wow! You're early," she screamed.