

But... The Tree *was* the View: Understanding Human-Nature Relationships

by

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I dedicate this paper to all of you.

### **Abstract**

This thesis takes the reader on a journey towards a deeper understanding of human-nature relationships. The term *nature* is defined, and practical information regarding the effect human-nature relationships have on human health is discussed. The reader is provided with an overview of how different indigenous worldviews understand human-nature relationships, and how these worldviews have promoted nature inclusivity within concepts of cosmology, animism, kinship, and reciprocity. Indigenous worldviews are compared to Western worldviews as it pertains to human-nature relationships. A nature ethic is then presented, which furthers the readers understanding of the interconnected web of relations that make up this earth. The reader will then be presented information regarding how to bridge human-nature connections and how to build human-nature relationships.

**Keywords:** Counselling, Ecology, Ecological lens, Ecosystem, Education, Ethics, Human-Nature relationships, Holistic, Holistic health, Indigenous, Mother Earth, Nature, Nature ethic, Rhizome theory, Systems theory

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**But... The Tree *was* the View: Understanding Human-Nature Relationships****Chapter 1: Introduction****Background**

I have always paid attention to nature. Throughout my life, I have come to understand that my relationship with nature is what sustains me as a human. When asked the question “what makes you come alive?” my answer is always “being in nature.”

I have had many experiences in my career working with youth that have led me to believe that being connected to nature sustains many individuals. The first time I really connected the dots, was when I was working in an alternate program at a secondary school. Many of the youth who were referred to see me were struggling with symptoms many would refer to as anxiety, depression, or general feelings of being unwell. We usually conversed in my office, until one day, a very shy, reserved, and anxious young lady sat in my office chair. We had multiple sessions where she would sit, and I would wait, in an ongoing cycle of silence or small talk. I could sense her hesitation and discomfort. One day I asked her if she would like to take the session outside. She agreed, and we started a journey together that I later came to recognize as a nature-inclusive therapeutic session.

During our first outdoor session, she began to open up. I noticed that these outdoor sessions seemed to reconnect her with a calming presence that was inside of her, which allowed her to explore the issues that were affecting her sense of well-being. The success that came from her journey, led to successes in other people’s journeys as I started to take my practice outdoors with the hope of connecting people to nature as a source of support.

There are other glimpses into the importance of human-nature relationships that I have seen throughout my career as well. One such glimpse was more recent. I had developed a

relationship with one of the most “at-risk” youth that I have come across in my entire career. One day, this youth came in to see me incredibly agitated and angry. This is an individual who has developed very high “anger walls” to protect an incredibly vulnerable heart of gold. Part way through our conversation, I noticed a small tattoo on his wrist. I asked him about it. He told me that he got this tattoo a year prior, and that it was the name of his cat who passed away last winter. He said that his feline friend was the sweetest being he had ever met. She would come into his room to comfort him during times of distress, and would lick his face when he was upset.

He told me that he got this tattoo in honor of her, and as a permanent reminder to himself to think about what *she* would do during his moments of anger. He said that being reminded of her kind and gentle spirit helped him to remain calm. She nurtured him. As he relayed his story to me, I was reminded of how impactful interspecies friendships can be. It was yet another example of the importance of building human-nature relationships.

The nature-stories that I have come to know, and the nature-experiences that I have had, instilled a curiosity in me around understanding human-nature relationships. I believe that growing my knowledge in this area will help me to develop a more holistic counselling practice.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this Manuscript Thesis is to bring together areas of literature that help broaden the readers understanding of what a personal relationship with nature might entail. Each chapter brings forward important questions and concepts, and attempts to bring an understanding towards different aspects of human-nature relationships, with a particular focus upon the therapeutic context.

My experiences with nature, and my research on human-nature relationships, has taken me to a place where I have come to understand nature in a different way. I believe that as



humans, we tend to see nature as something outside of ourselves. Something wild and elemental. We forget that as humans, we *are* nature. We are part of the web of interconnections that make up nature.

In Chapter five, I discuss the reason why I have put together the terms *human-nature* throughout this paper. This may seem like I am recognizing *humans* and *nature* as separate entities. My intention is not to reduce them to separate entities, but rather to help the reader understand that humans must still acknowledge and develop a relationship with other species that are also part of *nature*. Humans *are* nature... but so are rivers, mountains, rocks, animals, trees, wind, ocean, sun and moon etc. *Nature* encompasses us all, and there are endless opportunities to build reciprocal relationships with different species that are also placed into the category of *nature*.

My hope is that throughout the journey that this paper takes its reader, the reader will begin to think of their own relationship with nature. That they will come to understand where they are situated within the extensive web of all of our nature relations. That they will be curious towards the languages of nature, and make space for conversations that they may not have realized they could have. My hope is that the reader will think about their own value system, and make space to internalize values that support a nature ethic.

My hope for counsellors is that they begin to understand and support human-nature relationships, and adopt a nature-inclusive therapeutic lens. I believe that by broadening our lens to recognize human-nature relationships as one aspect of wellness, and exploring this relationship with the individuals that we see, we will be able to uphold a more holistic practice.

**Literature review**

The literature that I reviewed comes from a combination of books, peer-reviewed journals, videos, newspaper articles, blogs, government websites, and online written academia. I have attempted to be as culturally sensitive as possible, and much of my literature came from writers who can directly relate with the subject in question. For example, in my search to gain knowledge of indigenous culture, I turned much of my attention to literature that has been written by indigenous participants who are directly knowledgeable in their own culture. Each chapter provides a review of the literature that is directed at the given topic of that chapter. The chapter outlines are as follows:

Chapter two builds the readers knowledge of how nature is defined. Practical information regarding the effect of human-nature relationships on human health is discussed. Chapter three gives the reader a brief overview of how different indigenous worldviews understand human-nature relationships. Concepts which promote nature inclusivity are presented including cosmology, animism, kinship, and reciprocity. Chapter four presents a nature ethic, which promotes a way of understanding the world based on values that recognize the extensive web of interrelationships between all species on this earth. Chapter five explains how to develop human-nature relationships within a therapeutic context. This includes paying attention to human-nature interconnectedness, bridging human-nature connections, building human-nature relationships, and making space for human-nature conversations.

**Definition of Terms**

Throughout this paper, there will be many terms which will be defined within the context of this topic. Here is an outline of these terms:

- *Animism*: The theory that all living creatures as well as natural objects are imbued with an invisible soul that animates the conscious body, but that is able to act independently of the body (Serpell, 2011)
- *Anthropocentric*: Centered on human life (Naess & Drengson, 2012)
- *Biocentric*: Centered on life (Naess & Drengson, 2012)
- *Biophilia*: The innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes (Wilson, 1986)
- *Chanul*: Within Mayan culture, these are soul animals that are given to individuals at birth via celestial powers (Serpell, 2011)
- *Cosmology*: The theory of how the universe came to be (Kragh, 2017)
- *Deep ecology*: A biocentric understanding of life that promotes ecological sustainability and that recognizes the intrinsic value of all beings within the natural world (Naess & Drengson, 2012)
- *Ecology*: The study of relationships between plants, animals, and the environment (Nurse, Basher, Bone, and Bird, 2010)
- *Ecosystem*: The intricate weave of interconnections between all of the natural entities living on this earth (Nurse, et al., 2010)
- *Ethics*: a web of values and beliefs that motivate individuals or societies towards ideal thought and action (Corey, Shneider-Corey, & Callanan, 2011)
- *Indigenous*: A generalized reference to the thousands of small scale societies who have distinct languages, kinship systems, mythologies, ancestral memories, and homelands (Grim, n. d., par. 1)
- *Indigenous worldview (as it pertains to nature)*: Spiritually orientated society; Collectivist society that operates on the belief that everything is interconnected,

prioritizing group over self; The land is sacred; time is non-linear and cyclical; Human beings are not the most important in the world (Indigenous corporate training, 2016)

- *Kinship*: A relationship through ancestral origin, including non-human ancestors
- *Land ethic*: A community of interdependent parts that prompt individuals to both compete and co-operate, utilizing an extended boundary of *community* to include soils, waters, plants, animals, and the land (Hoebel, 1972)
- *Medicine*: The art of healing (Mitten, 2009)
- *Medicine wheel*: A metaphoric model which promotes a holistic approach to wellness that promotes human-nature interconnectedness through spiritual concepts (Bell, 2013)
- *Mother Earth*: A unique, indivisible, self-regulating community of interrelated beings that sustains, contains and reproduces all beings (Universal declaration of the right of Mother Earth, April, 2010).
- *Nature*: That which is not artificial; A complex system of interrelationships between species which includes human and non-human species. There is no separation between *humans and nature*
- *Nature ethic*: A web of values and beliefs that motivate individuals or societies towards ideal thought and action regarding nature
- *Reciprocity*: The act of both giving and taking
- *Rhizome*: A network of nodes and lines that are usually found underground connecting networks of things together (Rhizomenetwork, 2017)
- *Rhizome theory*: A botanical metaphor that explains the interconnections of all things, minimizes hierarchical organization, and sees the world through endless horizontal interconnections which are in constant flux and movement (Rhizomenetwork, 2017)

- *Systems theory*: A theory that understands human behavior and experience as complex systems where the interrelationship between things is sought to be understood (Walker, 2012).
- *The Gifts of the Four Directions*: An Anishnaabe model of the medicine wheel (Bell, 2013)
- *Unlisted languages*: Languages of animals, birds, forests, rivers, etc., Languages that are often misunderstood, minimized, or stifled due to a human-centered framework of understanding (Hoffman, 2007; Rhizomenetwork, 2017)
- *Values*: Beliefs and attitudes that provide direction to everyday living (Corey, Shneider-Corey, & Callanan, 2011)
- *Western worldview (as it pertains to nature)*: Science orientated society; individualistic society that prioritizes independence and self-reliance over prioritizing group; the land and its resources are available to benefit humans; time is linear and future orientated; human beings are the most important in the world. (Indigenous corporate training, 2016)
- *Witness*: Making space for conversations that allow voices to emerge that have often been stifled or withheld (Hoffman, 2007)

### **Significance of Study**

The study of human-nature relationships is significant because of the impact this relationship has on all beings living within this earth. From an individual level, exploring and developing a relationship with nature will help re-situate oneself in the world. From a societal level, building human-nature relationships can help support values and ethics related to ecological well-being. From an earth level, developing and maintaining healthy human-nature

relationships can start to re-build the planet in a respectful, holistic, and environmentally sustainable way that reflects the health of all humans and non-humans.

The human-nature relationship is an integral relationship that is often left unassessed. It is an extensive and fluctuating relationship that cannot be ignored. It is vital that counsellors explore this relationship with the clients that they see, so that health and wellness can be assessed through a more holistic lens.

## Chapter 2: Defining Nature and Recognizing the Importance of Human-Nature Relationships

### Introduction

I live on the edge of a mountain where my suite overlooks my hometown of Chilliwack. My suite is situated so that when you walk out to the edge of the backyard fence and look down, you will see a walking path that extends from the top of my neighborhood and curves down through the mountain to the valley below. Almost directly behind my suite and on the edge of the walking path below, stood a tall birch tree. Over the years, I have watched numerous creatures utilize this old birch. I watched little birds flit back and forth among its branches, woodpeckers knock rampantly on its trunk, squirrels hide nuts along its base, and even an owl who spent two summers perched up high vocalizing his territorial “hoot” in the darkness of night. The sound of the wind breathing through the branches of this tree was calming and would often nurture me into a patio nap on a hot summer day.

One day, the neighborhood people decided they were tired of having this lone tree obstruct their manicured view of the city below. Much to my feelings of heartbreak and dismay, they collaborated together to axe down this tree, and were successful after two days of arduous physical labor. The tree fell down onto the path below, and the neighborhood had their view back. Shortly after this event, my parents came over and noticed that something was different. I held back tears as I explained to them that the neighbors had chopped down the tree so that they could have a better view, to which my father replied words that I will never forget: “but... the tree *was* the view...” My father’s statement opened up a conversation about a certain set of values. Values that respect nature, and honor other-life as equally important as human-life.

Perhaps my values had evolved to embrace a nature ethic that honors all beings within this world as being equally valuable and important.

I began to wonder why destroying that beautiful birch felt devastating to me, yet others had no problem chopping it down. I began to think about the relationship I had with this tree and the relationship I had with the creatures who utilized it. Perhaps I had developed a strong enough relationship with nature that I was able to empathize with it when it was in pain. Perhaps in chopping down that tree, an integral line of human-nonhuman connection had been severed leaving my spirit feeling empty.

I began to think that if this is true for me, then surely there are others who recognize this truth within themselves too. I began to question how my relationship with nature developed, and how this relationship shapes my sense of self and sense of place within this world. I started to ponder how I can help others develop a personal relationship with nature, and how the benefits of this might manifest itself within a therapeutic setting. This led me towards research that investigates human-nature relationships. This chapter will outline how we define nature, the physical health benefits of being connected to nature, and the mental health benefits of beings connected to nature.

### **What is Nature?**

Deep ecology clearly rejects divisions between the human and nonhuman worlds, and suggests instead that human identity derives from an ecological consciousness...deep ecology promotes harmony and connections among all forms of being, a mutual dependence rather than human domination of the natural world for economic gain. (Zapf, 2010, p. 35)



Defining nature is integral if we are to begin thinking about how we can develop a relationship with it. This definition begins with an understanding of how we see the world. As introduced in the quote above, it is important to understand that the world is made up of interconnections that create mutual dependence between species. This way of understanding the world can be described as a systems lens.

### **Defining systems theory**

I look at life through a *systems lens*. A systems approach within counselling understands human behavior and experience as complex systems where the interrelationship between things is sought to be understood (Walker, 2012). My research stems from this theory, and recognizes that all beings are interconnected and share mutual dependence on one another for survival. The system I'm looking at is the complex lines of connection and web of interrelationships between humans and nature.

To further this explanation, Meadows (1989) explains that a system is an interconnected set of elements that is organized around a purpose. The world is viewed as a single whole with no clear dividing lines between man and nature, except the lines we make within our minds. Meadows describes the interconnection between human and nature beautifully with this description:

With every breath you draw in, a part of the environment becomes part of you. With every breath you give out, a part of you becomes a part of the environment. The cycling waters of the earth flow through you, as do the cycles of carbon, of oxygen, of nitrogen, and of the other elements that make up your structure. Though you may not see the connection between an automobile's exhaust and your lungs, or between the health of the

soil and the health of the people who eat food grown in that soil, those connections are there. (p. 11)

When I speak of using a systems lens, I am highlighting the importance of paying attention to the interrelationships and lines of connection that exist between and within humans and nature.

### **Defining nature**

It is Homer (c. 7000 BCE) who first used the word ‘nature’ (*φύσις* – in Greek) to describe the ‘character’ of plants, referring to innate characteristics of beings and things (Arias-Maldonado, 2015). In my search to define the word *nature*, I came across a multitude of definitions and meanings. Bonnett (2004) highlights four different definitions in which the term *nature* might be understood. These definitions help to understand that this word has a multitude of meanings depending on the context:

1. *Nature* as the great scheme of things; a system of natural or physical laws, patterns of causality, etc.
2. *Nature* which is wild, elemental, and beyond human control; that which is non-human and is essentially independent of human purposes and culture.
3. *Nature* as what is inherent or innate; that which constitutes our essential being, unaffected by compromise or artifice.
4. *Nature* as what is healthy, ‘normal,’ and innately good; often implicitly understood as what is biologically normal, socially accepted, morally desirable, or religiously true. (p. 120-121)

Bonnett’s description of “nature which is wild, elemental, and beyond human control” (number two) relays the closest example of how I will define *nature* throughout this paper. However I will point out that this definition of nature positions humans and nature as separate

from each other. From a systems lens, I believe that humans and nature are not independent of one another, but understood as a whole...as an entire system of interrelationships (as Meadows describes in the dialogue above).

To further clarify how I will define the word *nature* within the context of this paper, I will highlight the definition that comes from Arias-Maldonado (2015) which states:

there is a reasonable starting point for defining what nature is: nature is that what is not artificial...the concept of nature would thus cover all those entities and processes that come into being or exist without any human intervention...natural entities are not the result of human intentions, but rather they exist independently from human designs or purposes. (p. 18)

The air, the trees, the earth, the wind, the rocks, the water, the creatures, the humans. Nature is all around us, and nature is within us.

### **Defining ecology and ecosystem**

Another word which will be used throughout this paper is *ecology*. Nurse, Basher, Bone, and Bird (2010) describe this term by stating that “the word ecology was introduced by Haeckel in 1866 and comes from the Greek: 'oikos' (house) + 'logos' (study of)... Ecology can be defined as the study of relationships between plants, animals and the environment” (p. 3). If we look a bit further at the term *ecosystem*, we can see that the systems lens that I mentioned earlier is embedded within this definition. The terms *ecology* and *system* merge together to create the term *ecosystem* to explain the intricate weave of interconnections between all of the natural entities living on this earth. Ecosystems are understood as communities of organisms that interact as a unit, including complex interactions between human societies, the natural world, and the wider environment (Nurse et al., 2010). It is important to understand that everything is connected to

something else. This web of connections and interrelationships between organisms is the *system* in *ecosystem*.

### **Why is this Important?**

If you are thinking a year ahead, sow seed.

If you are thinking ten years ahead, plant a tree.

If you are thinking one hundred years ahead, educate the people.

By sowing seed, you will harvest once.

By planting a tree, you will harvest tenfold.

By educating the people, you will harvest one hundredfold.

(Anonymous Chinese poet, 400 B.C.)

Although not the principle focus of my study, it is important to educate the reader on some of the practical evidence regarding some of the physical and mental health benefits that come from being connected to nature. This can be considered the roots of my literature review, and will provide a context in which mental health professionals might begin their own ecological research.

### **Physical health benefits**

The importance of being connected to nature as articulated by Ewert, Mitten, and Overholt (2014), can be traced back to the Reindeer Age (40,000 years ago). These authors explain that Shamans (healers) looked at domains of health (physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual) as intricately woven together which in modern society is symbolized by the medicine wheel. *Medicine* or *healing* was intuitive and spiritually connected to the Earth's processes. Disease was seen as disconnection from the natural rhythms of the earth, so part of

healing was reconnecting with the external nature around you and the internal nature inside of you. Coming back into harmony with natural cycles and rhythms was the antidote to illness.

Other traditional forms of medicine emerged from this nature-focused holistic philosophy including Native American Medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurvedic Medicine (the Indigenous Indian medical system), and Tibetan Medicine (Ewert et al., 2014). All of these holistic forms of healing are at least 5000 years old and focus on reconnecting with nature to promote health and well-being.

Although traditional models as described above have been practicing a holistic approach to medicine for thousands of years, a Western worldview has often dismissed these models as though they are a threat to modern science. The intrinsic belief that medicine involves reconnecting with nature is not as widely accepted or practiced within Western culture. Western culture tends to favour a more scientific approach that holds empirical evidence through standardized testing and medicinal prescription as the main components towards gaining greater health and well-being. Mitten (2009) furthers this understanding:

Even though *medicine* is derived from a Latin word meaning the art of healing, Western medicine is seen primarily as a science used to diagnose and treat injury and disease.... Western medicine has failed to move beyond the biomedical model and is rooted in mechanistic thinking....doctors are trained to treat symptoms using drugs and procedures that have proven mechanisms of performance. (p. 9)

This can also be seen within a psychological framework where the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual is utilized to understand and treat symptoms of mental illness primarily focussing on physical, cognitive, and emotional domains of health. The domains of spirituality and ecology are not integrated, meaning a holistic framework is not being practiced. Scientific

methods and mechanistic thinking remain the primary approaches of understanding human health and medicine within Western approaches to mental health. This mechanistic thinking tends to create less opportunities of exploring alternative methods that place holistic and spiritual connectedness at its roots. The notion that physical health is related to harmonizing the spirit with nature is often forgotten or considered to be insignificant.

Some organizations are starting to incorporate a more holistic worldview by recognizing the impact that disconnection with nature has on physical health. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) launched the national Be Out There campaign to get children and families to spend daily time outdoors for increased health and wellbeing. The NWF points out that children who are raised indoors are at risk for major health problems including obesity, diabetes, and vitamin D deficiency. Other issues such as vision problems, are also beginning to surface due to a lack of outdoor time. A study in the Journal of the American Academy of Optometry found that if a child has two parents with Myopia (near-sightedness), their chance of becoming near-sighted is 6 in 10 if they spend 0-5 hours outside per week. However, if they spend 14 hours per week outside, their chances are reduced to 2 in 10 (National Wildlife Federation, n. d.).

Additional research has shown that spending time in forested areas significantly reduces the risk of inflammatory cytokines (Mao et al., 2012) as well as elevated blood glucose (Ohtsuka et al., 1998). Inflammatory cytokines are released by the immune system in response to threat and have been associated with depression, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension. Elevated blood glucose is associated with health risks such as blindness, nerve damage, and kidney failure.

There is a growing body of evidence that shows how simply viewing nature can have restorative effects and rehabilitation benefits. In hospitals, viewing nature through a window can

lead to improved recovery and lower the requirement of pain medication within hospital settings (Ulrich, 1984). Contact with nature is associated with fewer sick call visits within prison systems (Moore, 1982). Impoverished single-parent mothers living in buildings with nearby nature showed greater ability to cope with major life stressors as compared to mothers who resided in buildings without nearby nature (Kuo, 2001).

Further research has compared differences in physical health, motor skills, playing behavior, and attentional functioning of children in nature nursery school (where children spent most of their time outdoors) with children who were in an urban-based nursery school. Findings showed that levels of sickness were lower amongst children in nature nursery school (2.8%) as compared to children in urban-based nursery school (8%). Findings also showed that children attending nature nursery school demonstrated significantly higher levels of attention/concentration, imaginative playing behavior, and improved motor coordination than children in urban-nursery school (Adhemar, 2008).

There is plenty of literature that highlights how human physical health correlates with human-nature connectedness. If we begin to understand human health and wellness as part of a holistic framework that includes nature-connectedness as a domain of wellness, we might start to embrace a more traditional approach towards physical and mental health. As mental health professionals, we might begin to recognize and understand our client's needs by paying closer attention to the web of connections and interrelationships that include nature at its roots.

### **Mental health benefits**

That the naturalist's journey has only begun and for all intents and purposes will go on forever. That it is possible to spend a lifetime in a magellanic voyage around the trunk of a single tree. That as the exploration is pressed, it will engage more of the things close to

the human heart and spirit. And if this much is true, it seems possible that the naturalist's vision is only a specialized product of a biophilic instinct shared by all, that it can be elaborated to benefit more and more people. Humanity is exalted not because we are so far above other living creatures, but because knowing them well elevates the very concept of life. (Wilson, 1986, p. 22)

In my personal experience, being in nature and paying attention to nature gives me a sense of comfort. I believe that we as humans are guided and comforted by the nature that lives around us and within us. This can be described as the biophilia hypothesis. Wilson (1986) coined the term biophilia, defining it as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (p. 1). Within his naturalistic approach, Wilson attempted to explain the therapeutic effect nature has on humans. Kellert and Wilson (1993) furthered this idea by proposing the biophilia hypothesis which posits that humans have an innate connection to nature, particularly to living things, which is rooted in evolutionary development.

According to Beck and Katcher (2003), in ancient times human's increased their survival based on their ability to locate food and hunt animals. According to this theory, the human brain is predisposed to pay attention to animals as well as the stimulus properties of their surrounding environment. Kellert and Wilson (1993) explain that biophilia

sought to provide some understanding of how the human tendency to relate with life and natural process might be the expression of a biological need, one that is integral to the human species' developmental process and essential in physical and mental growth. (p. 20)

This theory explains how human beings have an innate love for nature, resulting from our genetic make-up and evolutionary history.



If this tendency to relate to nature is essential to our physical and mental growth, then it makes sense to bring aspects of nature into both physical and mental health settings in order to honor and encourage the beautiful interrelationships we have with other living things. David Orr refers to the “biophilia revolution” which is “a love of life based on knowledge and conviction that in our deepest affiliation with nature is the key to our species’ most fundamental yearnings for a meaningful and fulfilling existence” (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p. 26). I believe that mental health settings can play a role in carrying out this revolution by acknowledging and honoring the interconnections between humans and nature. Nurturing greater nature-connectedness will aid in human health and become an essential part of mental wellness.

The British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA, n. d.) *Healthy in Nature* movement has played an active role in encouraging humans to nurture their connection with nature. This movement encourages British Columbian’s to get out into nature for a number of reasons related to mental health: being in nature improves mood, concentration, memory, and attention. It promotes feelings of vitality, self-healing from depression and substance use, and positive self-esteem. Even indirect exposure to nature has positive benefits such as increasing focus, improving mood, and helping people recover from mental fatigue.

Nature also draws out specific emotions within humans which impact mental health. Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007) focus on the impact nature has on feelings of *awe*. Awe can be described as “an emotional response to perceptually vast stimuli that overwhelm current mental structures, yet facilitate attempts at accommodation” (p. 944). The term ‘vast’ in this context describes any stimulus that challenges one’s current frame of reference. Accommodation occurs when one must interpret present stimuli into existing schemas, thereby assimilating new information into current frame of reference. Awe can be experienced as positive or negative

depending on the situation, and is often linked with aesthetic response, political change, and religious transformations, art, music, panoramic views, and natural wonders (p. 955). Shiota et al. (2007) found that the highest levels of awe were elicited when participants were exposed to nature versus other forms of stimuli such as art and music. Research also showed that regular experiences of awe increased positive emotionality, and had an impact on self-concept by increasing one's sense of self as part of a greater whole.

In Canada, nature-based interventions are on the rise. One of the largest empirically studied programs is the David Suzuki Foundation's 30x30 Nature Challenge. This campaign began in 2012 and is an annual nature-based program which encourages Canadians to spend 30 minutes per day in nature for 30 days during the month of May. Participants voluntarily complete surveys at the end of the challenge, allowing research to be collected and empirically assessed. Participants reported significant increases in happiness, energy, vitality, and overall sense of well-being (Nisbet, 2014, 2015). Participants who showed increased subjective sense of connectedness to nature also showed increased biospheric concern (concern for all living things), which might be considered an intrinsic motivator that inspires greater care and protection of nature (Nisbet, 2015).

Another Canadian nature-based intervention is the Canadian Mental Health Association's mood Walks initiative. This program's aim is to promote mental health, physical activity, and social connection by training mental health organizations across Ontario and supporting them to launch nature hikes for older adults who have mental illnesses. In 2014, thirty-seven mental health agencies partnered with local walking groups, hiking clubs, or trail associations and participated in the program. Of the ninety-nine participants who completed a pre- and post-

program questionnaire, results showed that participants reported decreased anxiety, increased happiness, and increased energy levels post intervention (Mood Walks, 2015).

### **Summary**

The research around nature-connectedness and human health is a fascinating topic. This topic continues to be explored in modern literature, and will hopefully start to shape a new way of understanding human-nature relations. My hope is that counsellors can start to see the benefits of human-nature interconnection, and consider it an integral component of the therapeutic journey.

Understanding the way that nature is defined and the evidence that supports nature's role in maintaining human health, might prompt counsellors to include nature into the therapeutic context. This can be done by utilizing an ecological lens, and listening with an ecological ear to understand another human's experience. Positioning oneself into a worldview that nurtures human-nature relationships will provide counsellors with a more holistic philosophy from which to work from.

### **Chapter 3: Learning from Indigenous Worldview: Embracing Nature Inclusive Concepts**

#### **Introduction**

Understanding the human-nature relationship is something I have sought to do since I was a little girl. I have always felt that typical Western approaches towards the human-nature relationship have not felt right to me. This started my search towards understanding different worldviews with the hope that I will be able to articulate my own. My understanding has evolved to be influenced by an indigenous lens towards the human-nature relationship, and I look forward to embracing aspects of this worldview into my therapeutic practice.

This paper provides a review of some indigenous worldviews as they relate to the human-nature relationship. The purpose of researching this is to provide a more culturally sensitive framework from which counsellors and educators can work from. It is to bring forth information that can help support indigenous worldviews towards nature that are prominent within North America, and to provide a basis for developing a new therapeutic philosophy that extends levels of support to include the human-nature relationship.

#### **Understanding Indigenous Worldviews**

In my research on indigenous worldviews towards the human-nature relationship, I have turned much of my attention to literature that has been shared by indigenous participants who are directly knowledgeable in their own culture. It is important to note that traditional indigenous ways of knowing are not as commonly seen in scientific literature. One reason for this might be because cultural stories and ways of being have historically been passed down via oral tradition. My first experience in recognizing this was in an educational setting where I participated in a workshop focusing on indigenous ways of grieving. Before the speaker even began, he asked us to put down our books and our pens, and open our ears and our hearts. He explained that the

wisdom that he would be sharing must be heard with the ears and understood with the heart, and writing this wisdom down would take away from the authentic understanding that comes from listening with the heart. Through this experience, I felt the purposeful intention behind oral tradition, which might be described through my own lens as a method of sharing knowledge on a heart level.

Another reason why traditional indigenous knowledge is not as easily recognized in scientific literature is because written materials from indigenous participants who are directly knowledgeable of their own culture have been slow to achieve recognition, and according to Brokenleg and James (2013), have only become more visible from the 1950s on. Before this literature started to grow,

most of the written history of North America, especially with respect to its indigenous and original inhabitants, has been written by anthropologists and archeologists [who] relied upon observation and study produced through ‘digs’ and second and third-hand narratives usually based on relatively unreliable language translations. (p. 54)

It is important for the reader to understand that many of the traditional indigenous ways of relating to nature have been understood through the lens of Western worldviews and perspectives.

It is also important to understand that “indigenous culture” is not a unified and defined construct. Each particular culture in and of its own has its own traditions. Grim (n. d.) explains that the term *indigenous* “is a generalized reference to the thousands of small scale societies who have distinct languages, kinship systems, mythologies, ancestral memories, and homelands. These different societies comprise more than 200 million people throughout the planet today”

(para. 1). Since these societies are extremely diverse, it is important that the reader recognizes that any generalizations might wrongly impose ideas and concepts on them.

Throughout this paper, I am speaking of indigenous worldviews and Western worldviews which I have broadly defined as follows:

- *Indigenous worldview (as it pertains to nature)*: Spiritually orientated society; collectivist society that operates on the belief that everything is interconnected/interrelated, prioritizing group over self; the land is sacred; time is non-linear and cyclical; human beings are not the most important in the world.
- *Western worldview (as it pertains to nature)*: Science orientated society; individualistic society that prioritizes independence and self-reliance over prioritizing group; the land and its resources are available to benefit humans; time is linear and future orientated; human beings are the most important in the world (Indigenous corporate training, 2016).

Throughout this paper, I would also like the reader to remember that:

indigenous traditional knowledge developed over the millennia is undermined by an over-reliance on relatively recent and narrowly defined Western scientific methods, standards and technologies, laws and an economy that extracts the spirit out of all life...the connective thread between indigenous knowledge and the relationship with all of nature and Mother Earth cannot be separated. (Goldtooth, n. d., p. 18)

Additionally, the phrase Mother Earth will also be utilized throughout this paper. *Mother Earth* is defined as “a unique, indivisible, self-regulating community of interrelated beings that sustains, contains and reproduces all beings” (Universal declaration of the right of Mother Earth, April, 2010, p. 1).

What I have come to understand through the literature that I have reviewed, is that concepts of cosmology, animism, kinship, and reciprocity are built into many indigenous worldviews and significantly affect the way that nature is understood and treated. I believe that these concepts can influence Western thinking so that the human-nature relationship can be nurtured and better understood. In this chapter I am attempting to provide an explanation of these concepts as they are understood in various indigenous contexts.

### **Nature Inclusive Concepts**

This section provides the reader with an explanation of some of the nature inclusive concepts that are present within many indigenous worldviews. These concepts provide a framework that a nature inclusive philosophy might be built upon.

#### **Cosmology**

Cosmology is the theory of how the universe came to be (Kragh, 2017).

Indigenous cosmology weaves together the material world with the spirit world, to create a systemic web of beliefs and practices that base kinship, territory, and governance at its core (American museum of natural history, n. d.). In Canada, First Nation, Métis and Inuit religions “consist of complex social and cultural customs for addressing the sacred and the supernatural” and “traditional ways of life are often intermingled with religion and spirituality” (Historica Canada, n. d.).

Central to my view of cosmology, I suggest that spirituality is part of what sustains a given region, because it is interconnected with environmental knowledge and a way of living; therefore spiritual life and material life are weaved together with the same thread.

From my perspective, a Western worldview tends to understand the spiritual world through a given religion, which is not as intricately weaved into the material world. Spirituality or

“religion” becomes a separate construct within the human experience, and spiritual understanding is not necessarily understood through relationship with nature.

### *Indigenous creation stories*

Although there is no definitive indigenous religion (as there is also no definitive Western religion), I have noticed that there are similar themes and practices that can be seen among indigenous spiritual understandings. To further the readers understanding of the spiritual differences between indigenous and Western worldviews as they pertain to the evolution of the human-nature relationship, I will provide examples of different creation stories.

Watts (2013), an Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee woman, describes the Haudenosaunee creation story. According to Haudenosaunee, Sky Woman becomes curious and falls from a hole in the sky to the water below. During her descent, the birds could see that she was falling and did not have wings to fly. The birds came to her rescue, and lowered her slowly to the waters below. The birds told Turtle that she needed a safe place to land as she did not have water legs. Turtle broke the surface so that Sky Woman could land on Turtle’s back, and together they began to form earth and the land became an extension of their bodies. With the help of animals, they were able to create land and the beginning of humankind. Through this creation story, it follows that humans are understood to be extensions of the very land we walk upon. The story of Sky Woman describes how the original human-non-human interaction was able to create significant changes in creation and humankind, and that inter-species relationships are of integral importance and must be considered sacred and understood as deeply interconnected.

The Haida who are indigenous peoples from the Northwest Coast, tell a creation story that explains how the First People came to earth. The First People emerged from a gigantic clamshell on the beach of Rose Spit. Raven (*Xhuuya or Nankil’slas*), known as the most



powerful creature and common trickster, heard the humans and noticed their fear. Raven coaxed them to come out and play in his shiny world. Raven with his supernatural powers and mischievous spirit, stole the sun, moon and stars for humans, and gave them fresh water, salmon, cedar, and fire (Library and archives Canada, 2005; Reid, 2000). The Haida believe that the Raven is sacred, and that Raven teaches humans to have a good life. They recognize that his creation is all around them, and like the story of Sky Woman, humans entered into an already functioning earth.

The *Stó:lō* or “People of the river,” tell the story of *Xá:ls* (transformer or little Christ). *Stó:lō* elders explain that in history, the world was mixed up. Animals could talk to humans, and humans could change their form (e. g. into an animal). *Xá:ls* came into the world to make it right. He travelled up and down the Fraser River and throughout the land transforming the world into permanent form. *Xá:ls* punished the wicked by transforming them into stone, and rewarded good people by transforming them into useful things such as cedar. *Stó:lō* people believe that the original person’s spirit is still inside, which is why they treat animals, trees, or rocks with the same respect they would show a relative (Carlson & McHalsie, 1998). *Stó:lō* Elder, Agnes Kelly, furthers this story:

The people from other *Stó:lō* villages have different ancestors: at one village it is the beaver, at another, the mountain goat, at another, the wooly dog, and at another the sasquatch. Each ancestor has the spirit of the person who was transformed by *Xá:ls* inside them...it’s inside everyone and everything...we treat everything in nature with respect because all of nature is alive and a part of our family. (Carlson & McHalsie, 1998, p. 30)

This creation story is another example of how the human-nature relationship is deeply interconnected and spiritually entwined.

Watts (2013) explains that many indigenous creation stories show humans as the last species to arrive on earth, meaning:

humans arrived in a state of dependence on an already-functioning society with particular values, ethics etc.... the inclusion of humans into this society meant that certain agreements, arrangements etc. had to be made with the animal world, plant world, sky world, mineral world and other non-human species... therefore, being associated with animals, whether it be through clan systems, ceremonies, or beings that acted as advisors, transpired from a place of reverence. (p. 25)

This is why in many indigenous societies, being aligned with the animal world is treated with respect and honor. A Western perspective might believe otherwise.

### *Western creation story*

In 2010, more than three-quarters of North Americans identified as Christian (Statista, 2018) and in 2011, the largest faith in Canada was Christianity comprising two-thirds of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, 2013). Based on these statistics which show Christianity as being the most widely held faith within North America, it would make sense to look to the Christian creation story to understand how the human-nature relationship evolved from a Western worldview.

The creation story held by most Western societies comes from the Judeo-Christian origin story which begins with the story of Genesis (2011). The interaction between the female human (Eve) and the nature non-humans (Tree of Knowledge, apple, serpent) led to the eternal punishment of humans. After being seduced by the Serpent to eat the apple from the forbidden tree, Eve was cast out of the garden and became eternally rebuked. Being cast out meant that she was placed into a situation where she was no longer part of her surroundings but outside of them.

Watts (2013) explains that there were significant consequences to this. First, since the original humans were cast out of their surroundings, they became positioned into a world where they were able to reside over nature. Second, inter-species communication became limited because communication between humans (Eve) and nature (Tree of Knowledge, apple, serpent) had tragic effects towards humankind. Watts explains that Eve becomes eternally punished and responsible for the pain of childbirth, and becomes shamed for interacting with nature which led to being cast out of it. Additionally, “future dialogue and communication with animals becomes taboo and a source of witchcraft for many generations to come” (p. 25).

The most prominent Western creation story describing how the human-nature relationship evolved, becomes a basis for the separation between humans and nature. It is important for the reader to understand that there are different cultural beliefs regarding creation, and these can impact our worldview regarding the human-nature relationship.

### **Animism**

Many indigenous languages do not distinguish the difference between animate-inanimate things: humans have souls, animals have souls, trees have souls, rivers have souls, rocks have souls etc. Each entity within Mother Earth has a valuable place within the circle of life. In order to appreciate the connection between humans and nature, we must first gain knowledge around the historical lineage of the human-nature relationship.

Serpell (2011) describes the concept of *animism* (from Latin *anima*, "breath, spirit, life") as the most archaic scientific belief system in which nature is imbedded. Animism involves the concept that all living creatures, as well as other natural objects and phenomena, are imbued with an invisible soul, spirit, or ‘essence’ that animates the conscious body, but

that is able to move about and act independently of the body when the bearer is either dreaming or otherwise unconscious. (p. 4)

This belief system is still practiced in many traditional societies, and has manifested a foundational web of spiritual/supernatural perspectives that is weaved into many Indigenous cultures.

Animist beliefs that focus on the spiritual essence of animals in particular, can be seen in many hunting and foraging societies where “offended animal spirits are often viewed as the most common source of malign spiritual influences” (Serpell, 2011, p. 4). For example, the Mayan people of Chiapas Mexico believe in “soul animals” which they call *Chanul*. These animals are non-domesticated mammals with five digits, and are given to individuals at birth via celestial powers. *Chanul* share the experiences of their human counterpart. Illness is thought to be a result of injury to the individual’s *chanul*, and the only remedy is to seek help from a shaman who will use more powerful soul animal influences of his own to cure the individual’s presenting illness (Serpell, 2011). The Maya people of Chiapas are “extremely reluctant to kill any wild mammal with five digits, as by doing so they believe they might inadvertently kill themselves or a friend or relative” (p. 8).

In many indigenous societies, animals are seen as a great source of strength. In some societies, it is understood that individuals are protected by their guardian spirits. These guardians take the form of an animal spirit, and the individual is said to have certain powers or qualities of the spirit animal that lives within them (Guardian spirit, 2007; Serpell, 2011). The Guardian Spirit Quest was once popular among many Indigenous groups, and is gaining a revival among some groups such as the Coast Salish peoples. During this quest, males spend an extended amount of time fasting, praying, and purifying themselves in streams within remote areas, with

the goal of encountering their guardian spirit. This encounter is believed to make the individual healthy and prosperous, specifically in the area of hunting and fishing (Smith & Parrott, 2015). Guardian spirits are part of an animistic view of the world, and animals are honored as being an important part of the human soul.

From this animist perspective comes an ideology regarding the human-nature relationship that Cajete (2000) describes as 'ensoulment.' The concept of ensoulment is an ancient foundation of human psychology, and can be understood as a deeply rooted psychological and spiritual understanding that the human mind, spirit, and matter are one and the same. From this ideology, indigenous people developed responsibilities to the land and all that is within it. Through the concept of ensoulment, humans and nature are one.

This animist perspective reveals that there is a stark contrast between indigenous and Western worldviews regarding nature. Zapf explains:

(I)n Western society, we tend to view the physical environment as separate from ourselves, as an objective thing, as a commodity to be developed or traded or exploited....in contrast, the foundation metaphor of Aboriginal traditional knowledge has been characterized in the literature as a perspective of 'I am I and the Environment'...their identity incorporates the place and their relationship to it. (Zapf, 2010, p. 35)

A Western worldview does not tend to subscribe to the concept of animism, but instead looks at nature as a commodified resource lacking any sort of supernatural power. Nature and humans are viewed as separate entities rather than aligned through soul and spirit.

There have been, however a few different approaches that are more closely aligned with indigenous perspectives. Although lacking a prominent animistic lens, two Western approaches

that attempt to understand the interconnection of nature and humans are the theories of biophilia and deep ecology, as touched upon in the previous chapter.

### *Biophilia and deep ecology*

Wilson (1986) coined the term biophilia, defining it as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (p. 1). Within his naturalistic approach, Wilson attempted to explain the therapeutic effect of nature on humans. Kellert and Wilson (1993) furthered this idea by proposing the biophilia hypothesis which posits that humans have an innate connection to nature, particularly to living things, which is rooted in evolutionary development. In ancient times, human’s increased their survival based on their ability to locate food and hunt animals. According to this theory, the human brain is predisposed to pay attention to animals as well as the stimulus properties of their surrounding environment (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Kellert and Wilson (1993) explain that biophilia:

sought to provide some understanding of how the human tendency to relate with life and natural process might be the expression of a biological need, one that is integral to the human species’ developmental process and essential in physical and mental growth. (p. 20)

David Orr refers to the “biophilia revolution” which is “a love of life based on knowledge and conviction that in our deepest affiliation with nature is the key to our species’ most fundamental yearnings for a meaningful and fulfilling existence” (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p. 26). Although the theory of biophilia recognizes a deep affiliation between humans and nature, it does not view nature through an animistic lens where even inanimate things are believed to have souls. The theory instead places most of its focus on the innate human connection to living

things as a function of survival. This furthers the idea that humans and nature are separate entities.

The theory of deep ecology comes closer to weaving concepts of animism into its philosophy. In 1973, Norwegian mountaineer and philosopher Arne Naess introduced the phrase *deep ecology* to Western literature. This approach is biocentric (centered on life) as opposed to anthropocentric (centered on human life), and promotes the ethical importance of ecological sustainability. Supporters of the deep ecology movement “hold that every living being has intrinsic or inherent value which gives it the right to flourish independent of its usefulness to humans....all life is interrelated, and living beings, humans included, depend on the ecological functions of others” (Naess & Drengson, 2012, p. 1). In my opinion, to recognize the intrinsic value of all beings within the natural world, is to also recognize that these beings have a spiritual essence within them that makes them alive and valuable. From my perspective, the concepts behind animism are quietly weaved into this theory.

The philosophy that every being on this earth has inherent worth and value regardless of their worth towards human beings, calls humans to change their relationship with nature and begin to recognize nature as having intrinsic value, rather than solely seeing it as instrumental utility to be used for themselves. It calls humans to stop the degradation of nature, and to only utilize it to satisfy vital needs. The deep ecology movement calls humans to recognize and support the already functioning ecological societies that make up this earth, and to humbly view humankind as only one entity living within a deeply interconnected earth. I believe that the philosophy behind this approach holds similar views towards nature as indigenous worldview.

### **Kinship**

Following animism comes the concept of kinship.

Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky, and water was a real and active principle. In the animal and bird world there existed a brotherly feeling that kept us safe among them...

The animals had rights - the right of man's protection, the right to live, the right to multiply, the right to freedom, and the right to man's indebtedness. This concept of life and its relations filled us with the joy and mystery of living; it gave us reverence for all life; it made a place for all things in the scheme of existence with equal importance to all.

(Chief Luther Standing Bear *Oglala Lakota* 1868-1939; in Goldtooth, n. d.)

The definition of kinship varies depending on the lens you are looking through. This term is commonly understood as a blood relationship through ancestral origins. However, when one understands that all of Mother Earth is connected through ancestral origins, the term opens up to include relationships between all beings, not just human beings. To understand this term we must understand it within the context of human-human relationships as well as human-nature relationships.

Brokenleg (1998) explains that "our worldviews are shaped by our cultural and family attachments....each of us drags around a *cultural tail* a thousand years long, as well as our more personal *family tail*" (p. 130). He explains that in tribal kinship systems, siblings are considered mothers and fathers, cousins are considered brothers and sisters, and "most everyone with white hair was a grandparent." The concept of "it takes a village to raise a child" comes from the worldview of these tribal kinship systems, and explains that children were raised by many mothers and fathers. Brokenleg (1998) states that "the ultimate test of kinship was not genetic but behavioral: you belonged as a relative if you acted like you belonged....treating others as kin forged powerful human bonds that drew everyone into a network of relationships based on



mutual respect” (p. 131). Kinship is then understood and recognized through both biological and behavioral patterns.

To further this definition from an indigenous perspective, I will turn to the Declaration of Kinship and Cooperation among the Indigenous Peoples and Nations of North America (Assembly of First Nations, 1999). The beginning of this declaration states:

We, the people knowing that the Creator placed us here on Mother Earth as sovereign nations and seeking to live in peace, freedom and prosperity with all humanity in accordance with our own traditional laws are united in our sacred relationship with the land, air, water and resources of our ancestral territories. We are bound by common origin and history, aspiration and experience, and we are brothers and sisters, leaders and warriors of our nations. (para. 4-5)

The ancestral kin relationships with Mother Earth, and with the land, air, water, and resources broadens the definition of kinship to include interrelationships with all entities on this planet.

The recognition that kinship must include human-nature relationships can be beautifully understood through an explanation given by Brokenleg in a Lakota and Mohawk dialogue between Brokenleg and James (2013). Brokenleg states:

the most often repeated phrase in Lakota ceremonies and life is *Mitakuye Owas'in*, literally translated as, ‘My relatives, you-all [are]’...this naturally raises the question of to whom this is said. The answer is: to all things. To human beings and to other nations -- some are four-legged, some fly, some swim. It is spoken to the sky, sun, stars, winds, plants, trees, and stone. It is said to all those in the spirit world, one’s ancestors, and even to those not yet born. These are all my relatives. My kinfolk include all things animate

and inanimate, visible and invisible, sentient and not. My task as a Lakota is to relate to all of them, to be a good relative so they will be good relatives to me. (p. 51)

This explanation alludes to the *cultural tail* Brokenleg spoke of earlier, and embraces all beings into the kinship system.

To further this understanding, Watts (2013) explains how nature is viewed through Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe worldviews:

Habitats and ecosystems are understood as societies from an indigenous point of view; meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand and implement...Non-human beings are active members of society...not only are they active, they also directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society. (p. 23)

This means that as humans, we are extensions of the land we live within and we must view the land and all of its inhabitants as members of our family. This is an important concept that counsellors and educators must understand. An indigenous worldview holds that family and relatives include all of nature's beings. This understanding helps to develop a more culturally competent lens that can be utilized within individual practice, and provides a more holistic framework from which to understand the world at large.

### **Reciprocity**

“We believe in reciprocity...when we take, we also give. For it is only by maintaining balance—within the self and within the world's communities—that we all survive in a good and healthy way” (Brokenleg & James, 2013, p. 55). The value of reciprocity is integral within indigenous worldview and provides a basis for healthy kin relationships. If a human takes something from the earth in order to survive, then something must be returned to re-balance the

relationship. In Lakota tradition, an example of this might be to offer suffering and prayer in a sun dance so that life and power is returned to oneself and ones relatives. It means thanking a deer for giving his life for food (Brokenleg & James, 2013). Graciously accepting a blessing that is given from the earth, and giving back a blessing in return, is the notion of reciprocity.

Part of this value system also includes the mentality that we must only take what we need. In order to respect Mother Earth as a living being and help her maintain balance, collective decisions are made that honor future generations to come (human and non-human). Only what is needed to survive is taken, and trust is given that there will be enough food for the next cycle.

A differing value system was introduced to North America when immigrants began coming into the land. Due to differing worldviews, they neglected to recognize that the beings (human and non-human) who inhabited the land had been living respectfully and cooperatively with Mother Earth for thousands of years. Values of peace and reciprocity nourished and protected all beings. As immigration flourished, human and government mentality changed and the land began to be seen as “wild” and something needing to be conquered. This led to uprising attitudes of superiority, consumption, greed, and disrespect, which began a cycle of human and environmental destruction that threatens our survival to this very day.

To further the understanding of how the philosophy of reciprocity lessened among Western worldview, it is important to consider that the mentality of reciprocity goes hand in hand with a spirit of generosity. From an indigenous perspective, real generosity entails sacrifice. If it does not cost you, it is not generosity. The process of reciprocity and generosity nurtures individuals and communities in times of joy and in times of need. Brokenleg (1999) explains that in materialistic Western culture there is a preoccupation with possessions, therefore not many examples exist of total generosity. He explains that as people live with an individualistic

mindset, they begin to fend for themselves. Excessive materialism manifests when a lack of human love is felt and individuals seek a substitute in “toys.” The flaunting of these toys then becomes a testimony of individual worth, creating people who are desperate to be seen and valued. Principles of generosity are what ameliorate this Western cultural phenomenon, and are principles that are seen clearly within tribal peoples for thousands of years.

### **Summary**

When I think about the ways in which the Western world has started to incorporate the positive effects of nature, I still cannot help but feel that it has an underlying intention of *what can nature do for me?* We are forgetting the second half of reciprocity which is *what can I do for nature?* Indigenous societies have been practicing reciprocity since the beginning of time, and I believe that Western society can learn from this.

Many indigenous worldviews such as those presented in this chapter, embrace nature inclusivity within concepts of cosmology, animism, kinship, and reciprocity. These concepts affect how nature is treated and how human-nature relationships are understood. Weaving these concepts into a nature inclusive philosophy might help counsellors support and understand the importance of human-nature relationships within the therapeutic context.

## Chapter 4: Bringing a Nature Ethic into the Therapeutic Context

### Introduction

When I need to nurture my soul, I go to the woods. I feel at peace there. I recognize my connection to all of the creatures and life around me. I notice the raw beauty that nature is, including the raw beauty of myself within it. There is an innate understanding that I need nature to take care of me, and nature needs me to take care of it. We take care of one another because we are one another. We are intertwined into the same circle of life.

I respect nature and hope that it will reciprocate respect for me. I respect myself as part of nature, recognizing that respecting myself and respecting nature are one and the same. Part of respect is recognition of story. I acknowledge nature's chapters of hurt. I have heard its cries as I witness many devastations that are bestowed upon it.

I also bear witness to the devastation that nature has created, with a power that must not be taken for granted. I wonder if perhaps the devastation that nature creates comes from a place of being misunderstood, from not being heard. Generating destruction might be a line of defense that stops hierarchy in its tracks. A defense that aims to restore harmony, peace, and reciprocity between humans and non-humans. A way of expressing to the humans who destroy it... who do not hear it... that they must recognize and understand themselves as but one small entity within an evolving web of ecological interrelations. Humans and nonhumans...inextricably and ecologically connected, all needing to be heard.

I believe that human wellness is intricately webbed into nature wellness. From a therapeutic standpoint, this interconnectedness cannot be ignored. The relationship between humans and nature is often left unrecognized as a point of exploration towards human wellness. I believe that connecting with nature, and building a relationship with nature, will promote human

wellness by helping humans resituate themselves in the world. It will open up a larger network of relations that can increase communities of support between humans and non-humans.

I propose that therapists begin to integrate an ecological lens within the therapeutic context to promote a more holistic practice. In this paper, I am not going to propose specific strategies or interventions to *combat mental health issues*. Instead, I am going to bring forth a *nature ethic*, a way of understanding and promoting health and wellness that places human-nature relationship at its core. Therapists might begin to consider the importance of bridging human-nature connection and nurturing human-nature relationships as a way of promoting client wellness.

### **Towards a New Ethic**

I believe that as counsellors, we have a responsibility towards our clients to look at all aspects of their life when trying to understand the presented problem. Using a systems lens, this would include assessing the web of interrelationships within an individual's life. One particular interrelationship that I believe is often left unassessed is the individual's relationship with nature. I believe that when we think of *personal relationships*, we perceive it through the context of interconnections between humans. I want to extend the parameters of *personal relationships* to include nature, and extend the parameters of nature to include personal relationships. The introductory story that I presented in chapter one of the old birch tree is an example of how a personal relationship with nature affects the human experience.

In the research I have reviewed around developing a personal relationship with nature, I have found that the breadth of literature has come forth through the field of education. Although I am writing this within a mental health framework, I believe that there are many parallels between counsellors and educators. Learning occurs in both contexts. As an educator, the

professional aim is to teach. As a counsellor, part of the professional aim is also to teach (often referred to as psychoeducation), but a greater focus is to explore. A counsellor will come alongside an individual and explore together areas of this person's life that might be connected to the present problem. They will explore together the inherent strengths this individual has, and help to cultivate these strengths to move that person in the direction they wish to go. They explore together lines of connection and interrelationships that make up the web of that person's life in order to bring forth inner knowledge, wisdom, and understanding towards their personal narration. Part of this exploration must be around the individual's ecological connections, as these connections not only influence them, but make up who they are.

### **Nature ethic defined**

I must first start with a definition of the term *nature ethic*. Corey, Shneider-Corey, and Callanan (2011) explain that oftentimes the terms *values* and *ethics* are used interchangeably. They describe the difference between these terms stating that “*values* pertains to beliefs and attitudes that provide direction to everyday living, whereas *ethics* pertains to the beliefs we hold about what constitutes right conduct...ethics represents aspirational goals, or the maximum or ideal standards set by the profession” (p. 14). The term *ethic* is then understood as a web of values and beliefs that motivate individuals or societies towards ideal thought and action. I will then describe a *nature ethic* as a web of values and beliefs that motivate individuals or societies towards ideal thought and action regarding nature.

Aldo Leopold (1949) might be the first individual within literature to present this concept. He proposed a new ethic that directly relates to the lines of connection between humans and nature which he called the *land ethic*:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate. . . . the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land. (Hoebel, 1972, p. 5)

Current professionals are beginning to catch up with Leopold's idea, and a new ethic is starting to be embraced within the field of modern education.

In 1972, Shaw, McClaren, Grant, Haffenden, Walker, and Church from The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) stressed the importance of developing a new ethic related to human-nature relationships, and encouraged social agencies to bring this ethic into all settings where human values and behaviour can be influenced:

No matter how environmental problems are viewed, it should be obvious that many of these problems are deeply rooted in contemporary and historical human values and attitudes: these values and attitudes must be understood if they are to be changed. . . . we must also fully appreciate the implications of changing them. . . . the solution to environmental problems does not lie in superficial measures, but will be found only in fundamental alterations in human life style and behavior. (p. 1)

Shaw et al. also recognized that some settings might have the ability to influence human values and behaviour more than others, and that these social agencies must provide tools to help individuals recognize and develop this new ethic:

(M)any other forces in society can and do shape and develop values and attitudes, but few, if any other social agencies, can provide people with the tools which they need, in



order to cope intelligently with information, and to systematically become aware of their values and of influences upon these values. (p. 2)

I believe that mental health settings are one of the social agencies that can do this. Within mental health settings, individuals are able to explore the values and interrelationships they have with nature, and recognize how nature affects their personal experiences.

In 2002, the Canadian government developed a document called *Framework for Environmental Learning and Sustainability in Canada* which states that “the vast majority of Canadians consulted felt that environmental learning must be inextricably linked to values and ethical ways of thinking” (Ministry of Education, n. d., p. 6). This document acknowledges that environmental issues are ingrained in our cultural ways of being, and that science and technology alone will not solve these problems. A new ethic around responsibility and caring toward the Earth must be embraced and brought into culture in order for human and non-human species to survive.

Leopold’s *land ethic* (1949) began a conversation that promotes bringing ecological inclusivity into individual and societal values. Some social agencies have started to adopt Leopold’s ideas with the hope that responsibility and caring towards the earth can be weaved into human values and attitudes. I would like to further Leopold’s idea of a *land ethic* by presenting the idea of a *nature ethic*.

To me, the integral difference between a *land ethic* and a *nature ethic*, is the meaning behind the words *land* and *nature*. *Land* entails all the nature that is around us...all that is not human. As stated earlier this would include “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land” (Hoebel, 1972, p. 5). A *land ethic* seems to understand humans and nature as separate.

The ethical obligation is to the land, which, perhaps, continues an ongoing division between humans and the earth.

Utilizing the language of *nature ethic* takes away this division. In chapter one, the term *nature* was defined using a systems lens. Humans and nature are understood as a whole, as an entire system of interrelationships. My definition of *nature* places no separation between humans and the earth. Nature is the soils, the waters, the plants, the animals, and the humans. A *nature ethic* encourages humans to recognize that they are part of nature. Their values, attitudes, and actions not only affect the land, but affect the humans as well. The ethical obligation is then towards *nature*, a web of interrelationships which include both human and non-human species that share the earth.

#### **Nature ethic within worldview**

The nature ethic that I speak of is rooted within many indigenous worldviews that were brought forth in chapter two. Brokenleg and James (2013) explain that Westerners:

(M)ust respect and reciprocate by incorporating indigenous worldview into their thinking: concepts such as circular, cyclical, definitions of life, relationship with the cosmos, kinship, recognition of ecology, mutual respect, and acknowledgement of the contributions of Native people to contemporary life. (p. 55)

While resonating with the spirit of Brokenleg and James, I believe that it is still important to include Western worldview into this conversation in order to bring balance towards the understanding we have towards a nature ethic.

Evering and Longboat (2013) promote an inclusive way of embracing all worldviews into this conversation. They promote a philosophy of “knowledge weaving,” explaining that

human beings must bring their minds together to cultivate Peace, to work together to perpetuate and sustain all Life... with this understanding in mind, just as two different peoples can relate together, two different systems of knowledge, one from western academia and the other of the Haudenosaunee...can complement each other, and much benefit can come from their working together for the 'river of life' that we are both travelling and both depend upon. (p. 249)

They maintain that this philosophy is necessary for the revitalization of human and ecological integrity, a philosophy that allows us to engage in conversations regarding nature ethic ideology.

A nature ethic begins with how we understand the world, and how we understand the world begins with the way in which we see it functioning. A Western perspective tends to understand the world as functioning in a hierarchical and linear manner. Many indigenous worldviews understand the world as functioning in a circular and cyclical manner. I believe that a nature ethic embraces an ecological lens that encourages us to see the world as an interconnected web of human relations in which humans are born into. This lens would align closer with an understanding that the world functions in a circular/cyclical way.

The circle is infinite and continuous. Vukic, Gregory, Martin-Misener, and Etowa (2011) describe the importance of this symbol's representation:

Everything in life is a part of the circle, which is different from understanding life as a continuum with a beginning and an end, or of excluding the natural world elements from the spiritual. The spiritual in this sense is not derivative of a God but to say someone or something has spirit or soul and that we are all related is significant. The circle represents the totality of existence, the interconnectedness of relations, and is symbolic of life. All

things are interrelated (relatedness is a core value) and everything in the universe is part of a single whole. (p. 69)

The symbol of circle nurtures concepts such as kinship and reciprocity. Every being is webbed into the circle, partakes in the circle, and is influenced by the circle, making it impossible to act without that action coming back around to affect you. It is a symbol that represents “a never-ending cycle of giving, receiving, and sharing responsibilities” (Brokenleg & James, 2013, p. 52).

Dancing to Eagle Spirit Society (2008) present a historical background of how many indigenous worldviews came to utilize the symbol of circle to understand life:

The North American First Nations regarded the circle as the main symbol for understanding life's mysteries. They have observed that all of life was circular movement which could be seen everywhere throughout nature. Man looked out on the physical world through their eyes, which is circular. The Earth is round, and so is the Sun, Moon and planets. The rising and setting of the Sun follows a circular motion. The seasons form a circular movement. Birds build their nests in circles. Animals marked their territories in circles. In the old days, tribes lived in circular homes called tepees and their communities were arranged with the tepees in a circle. Indeed, to the Natives, the whole of life appeared to be circular. (para. 1)

From these observations came a way of understanding the world that recognizes the circular, cyclical, and continuous way that it functions. Examples that utilize this concept within a counselling framework are healing circles and talking circles (Dancing to eagle spirit society, 2008), which provide a therapeutic way of bringing people together to share their voice within a collaborative system of healing.

### **Bringing a Nature Ethic into the Field of Counselling**

How can a nature ethic be introduced into the field of counselling? Sablatura (2009) provides the reader with information to consider:

Counselors and counselor educators have the training necessary to examine the ecological issues impacting mental health today....ecological distress is, in fact, brought into the counseling room each day through the problems clients present....however, the integral connection between ecological issues and mental health has yet to be made. (p. 1)

This relates back to a systems approach where counsellors are trained to “hear” and address issues through a lens that focuses on interrelationships and interconnections within an individual’s life. Sablatura proposes that counselors might begin to make the shift towards an “ecological way of hearing.”

Hearing from an ecological ear might include paying attention to concepts such as eco-bonding and eco-alienation that live within the narration of an individual’s life. Clinebell (1996) explains the theory behind eco-bonding and eco-alienation. The theory behind eco-bonding is that healthy identity (self-worth and inner strength) occurs when an individual is firmly rooted in the biosphere. The awareness that all aspects of self (mind, body, spirit) are interconnected will help to provide inner feelings of security and strength. This rooted identity provides an organic relatedness with one’s body, with the earth, and with other living creatures that share the biosphere with us.

The theory behind eco-alienation is that when humans disconnect from the natural world that they are in and that is in them, it will dysregulate the rhythms of mind-body-spirit. Healing this alienation is an essential goal of holistic counseling, which many Western philosophies and

theories still need to become aware of. Hearing with an ecological ear aligns closer with traditional forms of medicine where a holistic approach is embedded.

The medicine wheel (Bell, 2013) is also a metaphoric model which promotes a more holistic approach that promotes human-nature interconnectedness through spiritual concepts. This model illustrates the human life-journey using a circular concept, and is a way of explaining relationships between various aspects of creation using a worldview of interconnectedness.

Bell (2013) describes the Gifts of the Four Directions, an Anishnaabe model of the medicine wheel. She explains that this model:

addresses the concept of the individual as having a spirit, heart, mind, and body and therefore connects, feels, thinks, and acts which leads to respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility as the individual lives on the planet with all other living things....

central to this framework is also the Creator's four gifts to the individual—vision, time, reason, and movement. (p. 95)

The four directions are connected to one another, and healing movement towards change is only possible when each component has been acknowledged by the individual. "In the east the gift of 'vision' is found where one is able to 'see.' In the south one spends 'time' in which to 'relate to' the vision. In the west, one uses the gift of 'reason' to 'figure it out.' In the north, one uses the gift of 'movement' in which to 'do' the vision" (p. 95). In order to create the 'movement' that the northern direction requires, the individual must acknowledge and re-examine the other directions to achieve a holistic unified vision. This process of healing is cyclical in nature placing balance and interconnectedness at its core. The Gifts of the Four Directions teaching provides a tool for analysis of human health through the balancing of all

aspects of life, and requires “continuous and ongoing reflections of oneself in relation to the natural world” (p. 95).

Finding balance must reflect fluctuating relationships with the natural world. Aikenhead and Michell (2011) explain that becoming whole requires balance among mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical capacities. When a person is in balance, they are then able to fulfill his or her responsibilities within an interdependent context of family, community, and nature relationships. Balance then becomes integral towards maintaining a nature ethic.

### **Summary**

A nature ethic provides a way of understanding and promoting health that places human-nature relationships at its core. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a *nature ethic* can be described as a web of values and beliefs that motivate individuals or societies towards ideal thought and action regarding nature. This means that developing this ethic starts with developing a set of values and beliefs that promote nature-inclusive concepts. It requires a recognition that humans *are* nature, and that all species are interconnected through an intricate web of relations. Counsellors might start to bring a nature ethic into the therapeutic context to promote a more holistic practice. Counsellors can shift towards an ecological way of hearing and addressing issues through a lens that focuses on human-nature interrelationships. Utilizing models such as the medicine wheel can help address all aspects of health including human-nature relationships, thereby promoting more holistic balance, an integral component of maintaining a nature ethic.

## Chapter 5: A Call to Action: Developing Human-Nature Relationships

### Introduction

Developing a nature ethic requires humans to pay attention to their relationship with nature. It requires humans to recognize that they live in an interconnected community of species that are always in relationship with one another. The quality of this relationship depends on how the relationship is understood, as well as the time that is spent developing it, nurturing it, and being in conversation with it.

Throughout my paper, I have put together the terms *human-nature*. I want to preface this chapter by explaining that my intention is not to place *humans* and *nature* as separate entities. In fact, as stated in previous chapters, I have explained that humans *are* nature... but so are rivers, mountains, rocks, animals, and trees etc. I want the reader to recognize that although putting these terms together might seem like I have reduced them to separate entities, my intention is to help the reader understand that humans must still acknowledge and develop a relationship with other species that are also included into the term *nature*.

### Understanding Human-Nature Interconnectedness

Everything is but an individual manifestation of an underlying whole. Everything is connected, just like the strands of a spider's web. Touch one and you affect them all.

True wisdom is thus a recognition that everything is dependent on everything else; that everything is interlined with everything else in an intricate network or web and therefore everything is respected because it is a part of the Great Spirit. Nothing is independent. All are related and interconnected. (Manitowabi, 1992. As cited in Bell, 2013, p. 99)

Understanding the importance of human-nature relationships within a therapeutic framework begins with seeing the world as intricately interconnected. Chapter two gave



examples of how different indigenous worldviews have developed nature-inclusive concepts to promote human-nature interconnectedness. Counsellors might begin to cultivate this understanding by utilizing a rhizome philosophy to explain the interrelationships between all beings living within this planet.

### **Rhizome theory**

In the video *All manner of poetic disobedience* (Rhizomenetwork, 2017) Kinman and Hoffman describe rhizome theory, a botanical metaphor that explains the interconnections of all things. This theory presents a new way of experiencing the world that minimizes hierarchical organization, and instead sees the world through endless horizontal interconnections which are in constant flux and movement.

A rhizome is a network of nodes and lines that are usually found underground connecting networks of things together such as trees in the forest. For example, Kinman (Rhizomenetwork, 2017) explains that trees in the forest are connected together through underground rhizome networks of fungus enabling the trees to pass nutrients to one another, an interconnected and reciprocal sharing that benefits the entire forest. Kinman explains that “even the trees are fully embedded in rhizome worlds, they do not stand alone and separate” (44:57).

This theory encourages us to recognize that ecological interconnections extend far wider than we might immediately recognize. Take the forests again. Just how important is the interconnected network of forests to humans? Wohlleben (2015) presents a story from Japan:

Katsuhiko Matsunaga, a marine chemist at the Hokkaido University, discovered that leaves falling into streams and rivers leach acids into the ocean that stimulate the growth of plankton, the first and most important building block in the food chain. More fish

because of the forest? The researcher encouraged the planting of more trees in coastal areas, which did, in fact, lead to higher yields for fisheries and oyster growers. (p. 245)

The health of the forests affects the health of the ocean. The health of the ocean affects the health of people who receive nourishment from the ocean. This story presents one example that allows us to understand the interconnection of all things through a non-hierarchical interconnected lens brought forth through rhizome philosophy.

### **Bridging Human-Nature Connections**

I believe that as humans, we tend to look at nature as something that is separate from us. We often forget that we are nature. So when we say that we have lost our connection to nature, what we've lost is our connection to ourselves. When counsellors who are working from an ecological point of view come across clients who have lost their sense of self, they can begin to listen with an ecological ear, and help their clients re-situate themselves within the world. The first step towards re-situating oneself in the world, is to reconnect with that world.

#### **Dislocation theory of addiction**

The importance of re-connection within a therapeutic framework is not a new concept. I was influenced by this idea when I came across Bruce Alexander's (2015) dislocation theory of addiction. Beginning with an explanation of the term dislocation, Alexander (2015) states:

I use the word 'dislocation' to describe the devastating psychological consequences of unrelenting societal fragmentation on individuals. 'Alienation' and 'disconnection' are equally good terms for this. Dislocation refers to the experience of a void that can be described on at least three levels. In social terms it is the absence of enduring and sustaining connections between individuals and their families and/or local societies, nations, occupations, traditions, physical environments, and gods. In existential terms it is

the absence of feelings of belonging, identity, meaning, or purpose. In spiritual terms it is the experience of 'poverty of the spirit,' 'homelessness of the soul,' or being 'forgotten by god.' (par. 23)

Paying attention to the areas of ecological disconnection within an individual's life can be the first step towards bridging reconnection. To further our understanding of how powerful ecological disconnection can be, I will describe Alexander's initial research in this area.

### ***Rat park***

Alexander (2010) explains that in the 1960s, experimental psychologists studied drug addiction in rats who were held in solitary confinement and caged in what is known as a Skinner Box. These boxes contained two small levers that the rats could push which would administer either water, or water laced with a dose of drugs such as heroin, morphine, amphetamine, or cocaine. Researchers found that the rats living in these condition ended up administering large doses of these drugs to themselves, leading researchers to believe that these drugs could be considered irresistibly addicting to rats, and by extension to humans as well. This belief fit nicely into propaganda related to the War on Drugs of that time period. However, Alexander believed that there was a different underlying reason that rats were choosing drugs. His theory placed disconnection of ecologies at the core of addiction, which led him towards a different type of research scenario.

Alexander's dislocation theory of addiction (2010) begins with a story of Rat Park. Alexander and his colleagues at Simon Fraser University were interested in studying the reaction from rats based on their connection or disconnection from their natural ecologies. They wondered if a rat's response towards drugs would be different based on the environment they

were in (solitary/caged vs. natural ecology). To study these differences they created Rat Park, which was a multifaceted ecology that mimicked a rat's natural environment.

In Rat Park, the rats were allowed to live freely while breeding and raising their young within a robust environment that mimicked their natural ecology. Just like the rats who lived in isolation, the rats in Rat Park were also given the choice of water, and water laced with drugs. The researchers found that the rats who were living within their natural ecology in Rat Park, rarely chose the water laced with drugs and did not show the same signs of addiction as the rats that were kept in isolation. This finding led researchers to believe that ecological dislocation plays a role in drug use (Alexander, Coombs, Hadaway, 1978). This created a ground-breaking ideology that placed disconnection at the core of addiction.

Alexander continued his research on the effects of disconnection (from environment, community, social connections, spirituality etc.) and furthered his theory:

The most basic finding is that people use addictions of all sorts, not just addictions to drugs, to adapt to the alienation or dislocation that is built into the modern age.

Dislocation and alienation have increased over the centuries and are most prevalent in the countries of that are most closely tied into the neoliberal capitalist agenda. Mass addiction has tracked the spread of mass alienation and dislocation. (Alexander, n. d., para. 9).

***Psychosocial integration as oneness with nature***

Alexander furthered his research on the importance of ecological connection by studying the effects of psychosocial disconnection on identity development. One of his studies focused on the effect that connection to nature had on psychosocial integration. Alexander (2008) explains that “psychosocial integration is experienced as a sense of identity, because stable social

relationships provide people with a set of duties and privileges that define who they are in their own minds” (p. 58). If an individual becomes psychosocially disconnected, their sense of identity is lost, leading these individuals to ‘identify’ with other things (e.g. drugs) making them more susceptible to problematic issues such as addiction.

Alexander went on to explain that “it [psychosocial integration] is experienced as a sense of oneness with nature, because members of viable societies share and reinforce a conceptualization of their society’s place in the natural world” (p. 58). Findings such as the ones presented through Alexander’s research help us to understand the importance of bringing a nature ethic into the therapeutic context by bridging human-nature connections.

### **Developing Human-Nature Relationships**

Where there is a strong human-nature connection, a human-nature relationship can begin to develop. The way in which we understand this relationship is important, and its development must come from a nature ethic that promotes respect and reciprocity.

In a relationship where humans are seen as having power over other beings, the other-than-human beings are not valued nor are they treated with respect. This in turn leads to behaviours that result in significant and negative environmental impacts including climate change, contamination of land and water, habitat and species loss as well as degraded human and environmental health. (Evering & Longboat, 2013, p. 248)

Evering and Longboat (2013) believe that the relational paradigm we must utilize to nurture human-nature relationships focuses on kin relationships, describing the interconnected spheres of relationships between human and other-than-human beings with whom we share this earth. They explain that a kincentric understanding:

views humans and nature as part of an extended ecological family...it is an awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin... the kin, or relatives, include all the natural elements of an ecosystem....embedded spheres acknowledge self-in-relation with some or all of family, clan, community, Nation, Confederacy, Earth, and Cosmos. (p. 247)

They present the importance of reciprocity within kincentric relationships, stating that for humans to maintain or regain integrity in our kincentric relationships, we need to continue to resume an attentiveness to loving and caring for one another, living responsibly within the cycles of nature, and expressing reciprocity, gratitude and appreciation for Life. (p. 248)

So how do we help develop a personal relationship with nature? Martin (n. d.) presents some ideas to consider.

### **Factors affecting human-nature relationship development**

In his research on the development of human-nature relationships, Martin (n. d.) explains that the human-nature relationship develops through three different orientations: travelling through nature (nature is seen as a place to go), caring for nature (nature caring is practiced at increasing levels through stewardship or friendship), and integrated with nature (nature as kin-relationship or spiritually connected).

Utilizing a pedagogical framework, Martin went on to study the effect that outdoor education programs had on fostering the development of human-nature relationships. He found that there were many factors which influenced the development of human-nature relationships within outdoor education programs, including the following:

1. *Language*: outdoor education programs provided participants with language that helped them conceptualise and discuss their relationship with nature.
2. *Extended direct experiences of nature*: extended direct personal experience in nature were universally seen as important towards the development of a personal relationship with nature.
3. *Individual and specific relationships with place*: revisiting places promoted increased human-nature relatedness.
4. *Comfort and competence*: comfort in nature was related to feelings of personal competence, which came from direct experience in nature.
5. *Animals*: animals were a common source of bonding with nonhuman nature

I believe that these factors can extend into a therapeutic context providing counsellors with new ideas towards helping individuals build personal relationship with nature.

Furthermore, encouraging empathy towards the earth might be seen as the true beginning of building human-nature relationships. In the words of Sobel (1996): “If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it” (p. 39). The therapeutic context is a great example of where embracing and encouraging empathy can take place, including encouraging an empathic spirit towards nature. In my opinion, having an empathic spirit towards nature is synonymous with having an empathic spirit towards self, a key aspect of wellness.

### **Paying attention to place**

Following the understanding that human-nature relationships are developed over time, it is also important to pay attention to place when helping individuals build their relationship with nature. Coming from a pedagogical lens, Sobel (1996) explains that “place-based curriculum can

mirror the expanding scope of the child's [or adult's] significant world, focusing first on the home and school, then the neighborhood, the community, the region, and beyond" (p. 19). This understanding extends into a therapeutic framework as well, with the understanding that counsellors might incorporate this into a nature ethic and provide a context where human-nature relationships are understood and developed.

Gruenewald (2003) states that "in order to develop an intense consciousness of places that can lead to ecological understanding and informed political action, place-based education insist that teachers and children must regularly spend time out-of-doors building long-term relationships with familiar, everyday places" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 8). This is encouraging, as it provides a clear understanding towards the importance of spending time in nature, and for counsellors to begin listening with an ecological ear and provide support using an ecological stance that extends into an individual's every-day environment.

Furthering this idea, Chawla (1988) reviewed numerous studies to understand how environmentalists and conservationists formed their political commitments and dedication, and found that those surveyed attribute their commitment to "many hours spent outdoors in a keenly remembered wild or semi-wild place in childhood or adolescence, and an adult who taught respect for nature" (as cited in Ewert, Mitten, & Overholt, 2014). These findings imply that the values of ecologically literate adults are shaped by early life experiences that fostered human-nature relationships.

### **Making Space for Human-Nature Conversations**

How can we learn to think and act like a forest? How can we learn to move in thought and life like a flight of salmon coursing up rivers and streams to spawn? How can we learn to think and act like a gut learns to digest (millions of life-forms, complex and



endless relations creating ways to give living and health to an impossible diversity of bodies)? How can we learn to think and to act as ecologies and relationships? And, how can we learn to think and act in terms of ecologies and relations in the midst of the human services work we engage in? (Kinman, n. d., p. 3)

Perhaps part of the answer to Kinman's questions is to make space for human-nature conversations. Conversations that will allow us to recognize and acknowledge voices that have not yet been understood by most human societies. Hoffman (2007) describes these voices as *unlisted languages* which can be acknowledged through *witness conversations*, both of which are concepts that will help develop human-nature relationships, and help to support a nature ethic.

### **Unlisted languages**

Kinman (Rhizomenetwork, 2017) explains that unlisted languages are “the languages that animals, birds, small children, crazy people, and artists use to communicate” (33:43). This might include the language of trees, of wind, of rivers and of the moon. It is the languages that we might not initially understand because we tend to view the world through a human-centered frame-of-reference. These languages are all around us. I believe that if we truly listen from a place that acknowledges the voices of other beings, we will start to recognize the differing languages that make up this Earth... languages that have always been speaking among us and to us.

If we are open to experiencing the unlisted languages of non-human others, then we open ourselves up to a world of endless relationships. We can begin to nurture interspecies relationships (which include human-nature relationships), which connect us to a broader support

network. As humans, we can broaden our view of *community* to include the ecological relationships we form.

### **Witness conversations**

From the acceptance of unlisted languages (or perhaps misunderstood voices) comes the ability to practice *witness* conversations towards all beings on this earth. To understand the concept of witness, I turn to the insights and literature brought forth by Hoffman (2007). In Hoffman's words:

The beauty of the notion of 'diologicality' or 'witness' is that it addresses the criss-cross of merging and overlapping voices, and their silences too, in normal, ordinary exchange. Instead of the 'expert' individual being assigned the most influence in this activity, as usually happens in psychotherapy, a 'witness' conversation allows voices to emerge that have often been stifled or withheld. (p. 70)

*Witness* encourages us to extend our community of support to include ecological relationships. It encourages us to simply be with others, to make space for others, and to make space for conversations with the unlisted languages that have often been silenced.

Although Western worldview may have a harder time embracing this concept because it undermines the typical independent hierarchical value system that Western worldview holds, I believe that traditional indigenous worldview has understood this concept all along. I am with the animals, with the trees, with the rocks, with the rivers...we are all interconnected as one. Penn (2007) explains that "our 'listening voices are our primary form of care, and they both participate and witness. They are there to appreciate the whole story of the suffering 'as many times as it must be told'" (p. 105).

**Summary**

When an individual enters into the woods, sits by a river, or looks into the eyes of an animal, they might begin to use their listening voices to recognize languages that may or may not be heard with the human ear. Languages that must be felt with the human heart. Languages that emerge when a witness conversation occurs. Languages that help humans re-situate themselves within a community that they have always belonged to. My hope is that one day, we honor the languages of all our ecological relations, and make space for respectful conversations. I hope that we build reciprocal interspecies relationships so that we can nurture the interconnected web we all belong to. I hope that we internalize values that support a nature ethic, so that we can begin to live together respectfully and peacefully within our shared home we call earth.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### Summary

This thesis presents information that aims to develop a deeper understanding of human-nature relationships. A definition of nature was presented, along with information that helps us understand the impact nature has on human health. An overview of different indigenous worldviews was given in an attempt to understand how nature-inclusive concepts can help develop human-nature relationships. An investigation around how values and attitudes can affect how we understand human-nature relationships was given, leading to the recommendation of embracing a nature ethic. Information was then presented regarding the importance of bridging human-nature connections, how to build human-nature relationships, and the importance of making space for human-nature conversations.

### Recommendations

My hope is that this thesis opens up a space where more conversations can occur. I believe that we are at the forefront of a new era within the world, including the counselling world. I believe that embracing a lens that decreases hierarchy and instead sees the world as endless horizontal interrelations, will promote a space that nurtures all beings. I believe that social agencies must be mindful of the values that they have internalized, as these values can lead to ethics that silence important voices.

It would be helpful if future research focused on further defining *nature ethic*, and how a *nature ethic* might be brought into social agencies. Future research might begin to investigate *unlisted languages*, and the influence these languages have on different aspects of health. Future research might also begin to provide a more in depth understanding of what it means to practice

through an *ecological lens*, and how this lens might view different aspects of health and wellness.

Topics in the area of nature and counselling are endless. My hope is that research continues to grow in this area, so that we can start to develop healthier nature, healthier humans, and a healthier world.

Here are my final thoughts:

Human-nature relationships are important. These relationships nurture us, sustain us, and situate us into a community that we have always belonged to. There are endless reciprocal relationships that we can develop within nature, and there are languages that we can start to know...languages that could support our body and soul. If we make space for respectful and reciprocal conversations with the languages of all our ecological relations, we can start to strengthen the web that connects us all. We can begin to live together with humble and peaceful spirits, sharing and nurturing a sustainable environment that we all call home.

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