SENSE OF PLACE, SENSE OF SELF

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by

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Approval of the Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy in Organizational Systems

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The purpose of this dissertation was to investigate how powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self. The human–place relationship is germane to today’s rapidly changing global landscape of political instability, conflict, climate change, population growth, and lack of opportunity, all of which are increasing human displacement, migration, and mobility. Further exploration of place identity is thus relevant to addressing these issues. This interdisciplinary study examined the literature in sense of place, sense of self, place identity, and transformative experiences. The research question was: How do powerful experiences of place form, inform, and transform one’s sense of self?

This qualitative study used Finlay and Evans’s (2009) phenomenological Relational Approach. The data sources were in-depth interviews with 8 participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Interview were conducted in 2 parts. The first part uncovered participants’ essential descriptions and meanings of powerfully transformative experiences of place. 6 themes emerged: (a) natural elements and geography, (b) community, roots, and belonging, (c) aliveness, wholeness, and the cycle of life, (d) freedom, adventure, and escape, (e)
possibility, becoming, liminality, and the unknown, and (f) enchantment, the sacred, and coherence. Data from the second part were categorized by how experiences formed, informed, or transformed participants’ sense of self and life path. 5 dimensions of experiences were also noted: peak, plateau, nadir, epiphany, and liminal states. Further analysis revealed 4 larger patterns. The first pattern was an opposing tension of forces between participants’ sense of self-continuity and change, based on 3 meta themes of The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present. The second pattern related to participants’ seeking similar place experiences. The third pattern noted variations in dimensions of experiences across the lifespan. The fourth pattern pointed to participants’ felt-sense of coherence and spirituality.

This study contributes to a greater understanding of how powerful experiences of place form, inform, and transform individuals’ relationships with themselves, others, and the larger world. Implications indicate a need for the cultivation of greater awareness of the people–place relationship toward a more coherent partnership. Further research into co-affecting factors influencing place identity formation and development is needed.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was twofold: First, it was to elucidate individual participants’ essential descriptions and meanings of powerfully transformative experiences specifically related to place, and second, it was to understand how those experiences may have formed, informed, or transformed participants’ sense of self or identity. A phenomenological approach was employed and underpinned this research. It was conjectured that data might reveal a potential relationship between how participants have made sense of their experiences in or of a place, and how they see themselves as a result, suggesting that transformative experiences connected with place may be instrumental in shaping an individual’s relationship with themselves, others, and the larger world.

Background

What the individual requires…is not a plot of land, but a place—a context within which he can expand and become himself. A place in this sense cannot be bought; it must be shaped, usually over long periods of time, by the common affairs of men and women. It must be given scale and meaning by their love. And then it must be preserved. (Heckesher as cited in Brett, 1970, p. 140)

The relationship between who we are is inextricably linked with where we are (Casey, 2009; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Heidegger, 1962; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Relph, 1976; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Philosophers, phenomenologists, human geographers, environmental psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, architects, and many other scholars and practitioners continue to explore and grapple with the intersection of the human-environment experience. Closely related to this inquiry is who we have been, and who we might become, which are also intimately connected with the places where we have previously been and where we might next go. The relationship between people and places is a longstanding and pervasive topic of importance, one that continues to be studied across disciplines in
philosophical, theoretical, practical, and broadly defined ways. Essentially, “to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place” (Relph, 1976, p. 1).

People’s emotional relationships with places, more specifically, have also been the subject of much reflection and consideration. Literature on sense of place (Biedler & Morrison, 2016; Cresswell, 2004; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2006; Seamon, 2000a; Tuan, 1974, 1977), spirit of place (Bachelard, 1969; Day, 2002; Lappin, 2015; Norberg-Schulz, 1980), placelessness and non-places (Augé, 1995; Relph, 1976), and place attachment (Lewicka, 2011; Low & Altman, 1992; Manzo, 2003, 2005; P. Morgan, 2010) all fall within the scope of affective and subjective experiences of the human-place dynamic.

Yet despite an extensive body of growing scholarship in place-environment research, the concept and experience of what is specifically referred to as place identity remains less explored among scholars. A basic definition of place identity refers to a cross-disciplinary cluster of ideas related to place and identity concerning the significance and meaning of places for their inhabitants and users, and how these meanings contribute to individuals’ conceptualizations of self (Hauge, 2007; Lewicka, 2008; Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Place identity, n.d.).

**Place Identity in Context**

The rationale for this study arose out of a changing landscape of people’s experiences with and of places, and how those experiences shape who they have been, are, and will become. The topic of place identity is particularly germane in today’s increasingly interconnected and volatile terrain of migration, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons. Geopolitical instability, climate change, war, oppression, and a lack of opportunity are among the factors
contributing to migration and mobility (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2016). The *United Nations International Migration Report 2015* (UN Department of Economics and Social Affairs, 2016) indicated that of the estimated 244 million migrants in 2015, “conflict, poverty, inequality, and lack of decent jobs are among the reasons that compel people to leave their homes in search of better futures for themselves and their families” (p. 2). Refugee numbers alone worldwide, estimated at 21.3 million in 2015, have reached the highest level since World War II, representing about 8% of all international migrants (UNHCR, 2016). Forced displacement continues to increase globally, with the highest levels of displacement on record. By the end of 2015, “65.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This is 5.8 million more than the previous year (59.5 million)” (UNHCR, 2016, p. 2). On average, some 34,000 people per day, or 24 people every minute worldwide, were displaced from their homes in 2015 (UNHCR, 2016).

Population growth and density are also contributing to record numbers of people moving for work, particularly to urban centers; whether by force or choice, people are moving (Heilig, 2015; UNHCR, 2016). One byproduct of all this migration and change is that the character and quality of many places around the world is being altered, and in turn, so too is the experience of these places. For many individuals, changing the locale of one’s home, work, neighborhood, region, or even country of residence brings with it a host of unexpected adjustments. These changes can elicit positive and negative feelings and thoughts, and can catalyze powerful experiences in the context of place.

Ongoing concerns about integration and assimilation of newcomers the world over are further complicated by current global issues of fragmentation, divergent political agendas, and
social unrest. Amidst the challenges of adaptation, and the changes that will be required to support the development of more inclusive communities, the experience of finding one’s self in an unfamiliar place, whether elective or not, can engender powerful feelings. Like other potentially transformative experiences, wherein one is confronted with a kind of disorienting dilemma, one’s identity can feel at risk. In these situations, the experience of place can be said to either inform and/or transform one’s sense of self. As Easthope (2009) noted, “the relationship that people have with their physical environment and the ways in which they understand that relationship through different conceptualizations of place are important aspects of identity construction (on both an individual and a group level)” (pp. 74-75).

As one moves through the process of adaptation and acculturation, the experience of sense-making with respect to place can involve challenging one’s sense of self. Acceptance or rejection of perceptions based on new data can generate a range of feelings, from shock, fear, or loss, to acceptance, gratitude, and grace. Experiences of place can be understood as encounters with otherness. Places thus offer potent opportunities for personal reflection, values clarification, and transformation.

Whether moving or not, for many individuals there is a multi-generational attachment to a family plot of land, a community, or a region, and for these people, powerful experiences of place can be equally transformative. These kinds of experiences of place are more about a strong and formative sense of self through place attachment, providing “stability and security” (Brown & Perkins, 1992), acting as “anchors” (Cooper Marcus, 1992), and investing deeply personal and meaningful sentiments that often resist attempts to change or alter those very places (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). For individuals who are rooted in, bound to, and feel a sense of belonging
with a particular place, their “identity is understood to be intrinsically tied to place” (Easthope, 2009, p. 71).

The experience of place in relationship to one’s sense of self, identity formation, and identity evolution is thus a topic of ongoing, and even increasing, relevance. This is true for those people for whom a changing domicile is an inevitability, and it is also true for those who know place as a stable base and anchor. Regardless of whether place is experienced as mobile, fixed, or hybrid, the interconnectedness of contemporary life, coupled with the realities of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous future, will continue to challenge everyone to make sense of their place in the world. As Ellard (2015) noted,

we stand on the precipice of enormous change. Urbanization, crowding, climate change, and shifting energy balances are challenging us to rethink how we can shape our own environments not only to ensure our survival, but also to guard our mental health. (p. 13)

In an ongoing dialectic with experiences of place, issues of identity construction, identity stability, identity coherence, and identity evolution will thus need further exploration. “By observing the intricate relationships between our lived experiences and the places that contain them—an enterprise in which everyone can participate” (Ellard, 2015, p. 13), engaged citizens, scholars, and practitioners can benefit from gaining an increased awareness that the power of place has on our sense of self, identity, and who we might become. The intent of this study was to generate more insight toward that end.

Another rationale for this study related to a pressing and increased focus on technology in contemporary life, which has shifted society from a more physically experiential existence to a cognitively focused and virtual informational culture. A disconnection from place and ourselves fits within this dilemma. For better or worse, an increase in interconnectivity mediated by, for example, social media, has become a substitute for genuine human interaction (Turkle, 2011).
Hyper-connectivity is creating both a sense of connection and an illusion of separateness. The result of this is

On an individual level, this sense of separateness has lead to discontented feelings such as alienation and meaninglessness. On a societal level, a lack of civility, an increasing social-capital deficit (Putnam, 2000), escalating conflict, and environmental degradation exemplify the fallout. (Stern, 2016c, pp. 5-6)

Within this context, direct phenomenological experiences, such as those of place, are often lost to people, increasing a disembodied way of being in the world (Stern, 2016a). “A delusion of separateness and sense of disconnection—-with ourselves, each other, nature, and the world—is the result, and it is a source of much suffering” (Stern, 2016a, p. 5, see also Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

Applying a phenomenological lens to the particular focus of studying powerful experiences of place, and how they shape the self, could yield insight into how to reduce this suffering and sense of disconnection. As well, new learning could offer clues into how to stay connected with ourselves, each other, and the places in our lives that contribute to meaning-making and enhanced quality of life. Continued research of this kind could also potentially be of value to place-makers, architects, and urban planners, who are faced with the ongoing challenge of creating and preserving places and spaces wherein individuals, groups, communities, and even nations will either languish or thrive.

Another rationale for this study pertained to the additional benefits of further understanding and recognizing places from a phenomenological perspective—as embodied, indivisible, holistic aspects of ourselves. Jones (2014) has offered

We need a new guiding narrative that accounts for our felt experience of our world—a story that embraces a more sentient, subjective, and holistic view of place not as a backdrop, but as a life force that permeates everything in our lives. From this perspective, a sense of place offers a unifying story that weaves together our relationship with nature,
art, and community, and inspires us to re-imagine not only how we live and lead, but the nature of the universe itself. (p. 1)

A more embodied, inclusive, and comprehensive appreciation for powerful experiences of place, and their impact on our sense of self, can reaffirm our interconnectedness with the whole of life. This can re-ignite affections and positive responses for both the natural and built world. An increased recognition of the value of an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2005) toward places, ourselves, and each other could then support a respectful interdependence of our co-existence. Places could then be understood as sources of life in their own right, as sanctuaries enabling experiences of rest and regeneration, as well as sources for crucibles, enabling powerful experiences for transformation and change (Jones, 2014; Stern, 2016a).

Continued learning about how experiences of place have shaped individuals’ sense of self could offer further research into how to cultivate powerful experiences. In addition to potential practical applications within the educational and study abroad fields, the tourism industry, leadership development programs, and expatriate enrichment experiences, further insight could provide wisdom into the essence of all things, for the sake of reawakening possibility, imagination, co-creation, flourishing, transcendence, and human evolution (Stern, 2016a).

**Research Question**

The primary research question of this dissertation was: How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self?

With this question, I intended to gather multiple stories of powerful experiences of place to provide insight into the emotions, sensations, cognitions, memories, and meaningful events that have shaped individuals’ sense of self. Important experiences at different places and times, across the lifespan, enabled distinctions between the places and assisted in making visible how these experiences contributed to a changing sense of self.
The following sub-questions, designed to support this inquiry, were:

1. How do powerful experiences of place contribute to the formation of one’s sense of self?

2. How do powerful experiences of place inform the ongoing development of one’s sense of self?

3. How do powerful experiences of place transform one’s sense of self?

**Researcher’s Relationship to the Topic**

This inquiry stemmed from the marriage of two longstanding passions: A curiosity about the psychological and social factors that shape one’s sense of self, and a belief that places are powerful and experiences of place leave a lasting impact on identity. My own natural sensitivity to places and environments, including a heightened physical sensing and intra-subjective awareness, served as the catalyst for research into these topics. The complex social and emotional content, interactions, and meanings ascribed to places are a perpetual and ever-changing fascination for me.

My early formative experiences growing up in San Francisco during the 1960s and 1970s offered me a unique window into a rich diversity of neighborhoods, each bringing a distinct history, social fabric, culture, architecture, and community to my consciousness. A bilingual elementary school education and an early class in urban planning furthered my curiosity. Reading several seminal books, including Jane Jacobs’s (1961), *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* and *The Hidden Dimension*, by anthropologist and scholar Edward T. Hall (1966), also enabled me deeper insight into the complex and essential qualities that make places, and their human counterparts, co-affecting.

The opportunity to study and travel abroad afforded me encounters with otherness in various forms. These included cross-cultural exchanges, place-making, architecture, and urban planning studies, and the realm of nature and wilderness. These adventures challenged my
previous experiences and mental models, and were both disorienting and transformative. I began to deeply question how individuals are shaped by, and shape, their surroundings. I then sought out further evidence, empirical or otherwise, to provide me with greater understanding into the factors influencing human development and identity formation and its relationship to the human-environment interface.

Professional training in the fields of design, architecture, coaching, and facilitation provided more clues into the visible and invisible dimensions of the place-people dynamic. As I honed my professional and interpersonal skills, I observed that both the physical and emotional characteristics of places appeared to matter a great deal to the quality of people’s experiences, and both needed to be carefully considered to support individual and group development, flourishing, and transformation. This background brought me roughly to this current study, a continuation and further exploration of my ongoing inquiry from a qualitative research perspective, with an emphasis on how powerful phenomenological experiences contribute to shaping identity formation and transformation.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) indicated that because some terms may be unfamiliar to readers, and the meanings associated with them can vary, “making terms explicit adds precision and ensures clarity of understanding” (p. 6). The following terms and key phrases, used throughout this study, have thus been defined to clarify the meaning associated with their use within the context of this research.

*Powerful:* Synonymous with the words potent, influential, significant, strong, and important according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary.
Experience: The relevant definitions from the Merriam-Webster dictionary are “something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through”; “an act or process of directly perceiving events or reality”; “the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation.”

Powerful experience: Given the combined definitions of powerful and experience, for this study, a powerful experience is one that is sufficiently potent that it elicits a transformative shift in one’s sense of self such that one has been altered deeply and fundamentally as a result. A powerful experience is synonymous with a transformative experience, and the two concepts are used interchangeably.

Place: A complex, multi-faceted concept, with definitions across disciplines, place can be broadly defined as “a system of experience that incorporates the personal, social, and culturally significant aspects of situated activities (Canter, 1996, pp. 111-112). From a phenomenological perspective, which is relevant to this inquiry, place is also understood as “a focus where we experience the meaningful events of our existence” (Norberg-Schulz, 1971, p. 19), and a “point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world” (Relph, 1976, p. 43).

Sense of place: A general definition of sense of place includes tangible and intangible elements that contribute to an overarching impression encompassing the way people feel about, sense, assign meaning to, and value a place (Stern, 2016a). Sense of place includes experiential and changing qualities such as somatic awareness, emotions, memory, attachment, history, and identities “that reveal complex relationships between the experience of a place and attributes of that place” (Jorgensen & Steadman, 2006, p. 316).

Sense of self: For this study, sense of self should be understood as an evolving construct including both subjective and objective dimensions. The subjective experience is an internal
process in which one has the sensation, feeling, or impression that an event is happening inside oneself, and that experience is congruent with who one knows oneself to be, either partially or wholly. The subjective self is the self as *I*, a subjective knower (James, 1890) which arises out of a kind of *felt-sense*. Gendlin (1978) described a felt-sense as “sensing an implicit complexity, a wholistic sense of what one is working on” (p. 52), or who one knows oneself to be, or potentially be.

The objective dimension, which understands the self as *me*—the object that is known (James, 1890), is composed of three aspects: one’s view of one’s self—*self-image*, the value one places on one’s self—*self-esteem* or *self-worth*, and what one wishes one was really like—*ideal self* (C. Rogers, 1959). Self-image includes roles and personality traits. Self-esteem refers to the extent to which one values one’s self. Self-esteem is said to fluctuate and vary in stability (Morse & Gergen, 1970; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012). The ideal self may or may not be consistent with the actual experiences of the self—this potential gap is referred to as incongruence. Sense of self is dynamic and complex because it involves both the inner and outer self. A sense of self assumes the capacity for reflexive thinking, which is the ability to take one’s self as the object of one’s attention. Reflective consciousness also allows for a “change in the organization of the self” (C. Rogers, 1951, p. 390).

*Self-concept*: A subset of sense of self, self-concept refers to how someone perceives, thinks about, and evaluates themselves—one’s belief about one’s self, including the attributes about who and what the self is (Baumeister, 1999). Structural aspects of self-concept may include an orientation that is individualistic (the *me* self), collectivistic (the *us* self), proximal (the *now* self), distal other (*future* self), immersed (*mind’s-eye* self) or the observer’s (*eyes of others*) self (Oyserman et al., 2012). Self-concept involves mental concepts (*self-schemas*) of
who one is, has been, and might become. This includes self-judgments, which are operationalized as *self-esteem* and *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1977). The social self also contributes to self-concept in that one comes to know one’s self through the responses and reactions of others in the context of social situations (Mead, 1934). Self-concept is a combination of self-esteem, self-knowledge, and the social self.

*Identity:* The term identity can be conceptualized as “a way of making sense of some aspect or part of self-concept” (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 73). Identity can be thought of as a subset, or a nested element, within self-concept, and self-concept as a part of sense of self. Identity theories (rooted in sociological theory) and social identity theories (rooted in psychological theory) share similarities but also differ in how they conceptualize identity. Both agree that it is the socially constructed self that “mediates the relationship between social structure or society and individual social behavior” (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 262). Whether through roles, norms, stereotypes, social or group memberships, diverse and multiple identities within the self emerge as a response to different situations and contexts. Groups associated with identity include race, gender, nationality/ethnicity, religion, social class, sexual orientation, and culture, among others. Identity is thought to be a context-dependent mental construct (Oyserman et al., 2012).

*Place identity:* Place identity refers to a cross-disciplinary cluster of ideas related to place and identity concerning the significance and meaning of places for their inhabitants and users, and how these meanings contribute to individuals’ conceptualizations of self (Hauge, 2007; Lewicka, 2008; Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; “Place identity,” n.d.). Other definitions of place identity describe it as “an integrating concept…not composed of separate or independent parts, components, dimensions, or factors” (Low & Altman, 1992, p. 4),

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation has been divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 served as an introduction to the study, providing an overview of the purpose of the study, the topic of place identity, and pertinent background information. The rationale guiding this inquiry was then discussed, followed by the research question and methodological choice of phenomenology. The chapter concluded with the researcher’s relationship to the topic and definitions of key terminology.

Chapter 2 situates this study in the context of previous research by providing a literature review of research and related scholarly material relevant to place and place identity, identity formation, and powerful, transformative experiences. The chapter is broken into three sections. The first section is a review of four key aspects of the topic of place: Part 1 provides insights into facets of place; Part 2 is an exploration of sense of place and placelessness; Part 3 reviews the scholarship on place attachment; and Part 4 discusses scholarship on the phenomenology of place. The second section is a review of the literature relevant to sense of self, in three parts: Part 1 provides an overview of sense of self; Part 2 presents self-concept; Part 3 reviews identity theories, in four parts: social identity theory, identity theory, identity process theory, and place identity. The third section, in three parts, reviews the literature relevant to powerful, transformative experiences: Part 1 gives an overview to powerful transformative experiences. Part 2 presents perspective on transformative experiences, and Part 3 includes types and dimensions of transformative experiences. Each section concludes with a summary.
Chapter 3 situates the study within the particular qualitative methodological tradition of phenomenology. In support of the research question, a brief history of phenomenology and an explanation and rationale for a relational phenomenological approach is provided. The chapter begins with an introduction to the methodology, situating the study, and the position of the researcher, within a social constructivist worldview. Thereafter, a detailed description is provided of all aspects of the study’s design and procedures. An overview of the participant selection criteria is then discussed, as well as ethical considerations for the study. Interview questions designed as guidelines to support the interview process were proposed, as were imagined conversations. Data collection and explication methods were also reviewed. The chapter concludes with limitations and other research issues.

Chapter 4 provides a presentation of the relevant qualitative data, an analysis of the data obtained, and a review of the study’s main findings. The chapter begins with an introduction and brief summary of and rationale for how the data were organized and explicated. The goals and objectives of the study are reviewed, connecting the study’s objectives with the findings. Next, a descriptive background for each of the study participants is provided, each of whom were given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. This chapter includes participants’ descriptions of powerful experiences and descriptions of the places wherein those experiences occurred. Data has been organized and synthesized by themes. Next, I focused on participants’ sense of self, including how participants’ identities were formed, shaped, or transformed by their powerful experiences of places. Data on participants’ sense of self (or selves) were organized and synthesized by types and dimensions. A summary of the study’s findings has been provided.

Chapter 5 includes a synthesis, interpretation, and discussion of the study findings. Four patterns emerged from a deeper analysis of the data. Patterns, themes, and findings were
discussed in relation to the literature, and how they contribute to answering the primary research
question and sub-questions. Study limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research
are also discussed. This chapter concludes the dissertation with final reflections, insights, and
inspiration that emerged in the research process.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter examines the literature relevant to this inquiry pertaining to place, sense of self, and powerful experiences. As outlined in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to answer the research question: How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self?

Secondary research questions were:

1. How do powerful experiences of place contribute to the formation of one’s sense of self?
2. How do powerful experiences of place inform the ongoing development of one’s sense of self?
3. How do powerful experiences of place transform one’s sense of self?

These questions required a review of the literature in a number of areas. First, I started with the topic of place because it is the essential context within which powerful experiences occur. Place is far more than just a locale as will be discussed further in this section. Next, I share the research on sense of self, as it is the self which is experiencing in the context of place. Lastly, I examine the theoretical literature on powerful transformative experiences, exploring how the self makes sense of, and is shaped by, various types and dimensions of transformative experiences, specifically in the context of place. This chapter concludes with a summary.

The first section of Chapter 2 on “Place” includes four parts: facets of place, sense of place and placelessness, place attachment, and experience of place. Because place is a complex notion, this section begins with a brief historical context of the person–place relationship. The first subtopic, entitled “Facets of Place” offers an overview of some of the diverse interdisciplinary research traditions on place that inform people’s understanding of it. The next part, entitled “Sense of Place and Placelessness,” is a review of the sensory, evocative, and ineffable dimensions of place that contribute to the characteristics and qualities that make places
distinctive or homogeneous. Place is also considered from the human perspective of *insideness* and *outsideness*. The third part, entitled “Place Attachment” is a discussion of emotional bonds between people and place. Finally, the fourth part, entitled “Phenomenology of Place,” is a review of the literature that brings a phenomenological, experiential perspective to place.

The next section, “Sense of Self,” includes three parts: sense of self, self-concept, and identity. The first part, entitled “Sense of Self” gives an overview of the topic of self. In the next part, I distinguish self-concept from other aspects of the self. In the third part, entitled “Identity,” different psychosocial theories about identity and its formation are reviewed. Within the subtopic of “Place Identity,” I map where this study fits within the literature.

The third and final section “Powerful Experiences” includes three parts: an overview to powerful transformative experiences, a historical and theoretical review of the concept of transformative experiences, and a discussion of the various types of transformative experiences along a continuum from nadir experiences to peak experiences and beyond.

**Place**

“To be is to be in place”

(Casey, 2009, p. 16)

“The power of place will be remarkable”


Since the earliest known human settlements in Southern Australia some fifty thousand years ago (Hamm et al., 2016), the human–place relationship remains “a natural condition of human existence (dwelling = being) (Buttimer, 1980; Heidegger, 1962; Norberg-Schulz, 1979; Seamon, 1980; Tuan, 1975, 1977), an invariant in a changing world” (Lewicka, 2011, p. 209). Early demonstrations of place-making efforts appeared in the form of cave paintings, which are thought by some to be an illustration or mark of place made meaningful. In a similar vein, the
first known human structures, located in southern Turkey at the ancient ruins of Göbekli Tepe, date back some eleven thousand years. Although the purpose of Göbekli Tepe still remains a mystery, it is speculated that it may have served as a kind of religious sanctuary, pilgrimage site, or healing place (Ellard, 2015). What can be surmised from the careful construction of Göbekli Tepe and its pillars decorated with pictograms of commonly understood sacred symbols, “may represent the very beginning of what has now become a defining characteristic, perhaps the defining characteristic of humanity: we build to change perceptions and to influence thoughts and feelings” (Ellard, 2015, p. 15).

Several other historical examples demonstrate a conscious awareness of the human–place relationship and how places are thought to shape the human experience. In Asia, the over three thousand-year-old practice of Feng Shui was developed with the intention of enabling life-enhancing environments through *ch’i*, which translates to vitality or life force (Kennedy, 2011). Feng Shui principles are based on a philosophical and spiritual practice that acknowledges the holistic interconnectedness and changing nature of all of life. Combining primal elements such as air (the breath of life) and water (the liquid of life), Feng Shui attempts to balance the complementary energies of yin and yang. Known as the art of creating harmonious and vital living places and spaces, Feng Shui is now practiced the world over. Although the historical stance by the scientific community about the efficacy of Feng Shui has been primarily dismissive, Feng Shui nonetheless exemplifies a longstanding and widespread attempt at harmonizing the human–environment relationship.

Other noteworthy examples of attempts at aligning the human–place relationship include the practices of *vastru shasta* and *Sthapatya Veda* in India, geomancy in Celtic and Medieval Europe, and wabi-sabi in Japan. Each of these systems represents a philosophy, belief, and
method to align natural forces for the expressed purpose of harnessing the power of place toward the shaping of optimal human experience.

It is not only in the built world where places and spaces have been intentionally recognized as influencing individual and community life. Human history is peppered with religious, philosophical, literary, and scientific doctrines that reflect ongoing recognition of and inquiry into the power of the human and place dynamic. The rich array of growing contemporary scholarship from the fields of environmental psychology, human sustainability, the phenomenology of place, and place-making, among others, is a demonstration of the importance of this topic. The next section will give an overview of this literature.

**Facets of Place**

The term place conjures up a multiplicity of meanings. Within the literature on place, philosophers, human geographers, phenomenologists, environmental psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and architects, among other interdisciplinary scholars, have each approached place from a different lens. Some scholars collaborate across disciplines. Others add to the diversity within their field, developing new and sometimes contested theoretical contributions within disciplines. The result is a growing body of work devoted to the exploration of the people–place relationship, particularly in the two past decades (Lewicka, 2011). This is an encouraging finding for researchers studying place across disciplines, because the topic is sufficiently complex, varied, and imbued with meanings that new areas for future studies will continue to be developed. Indeed, Canter (1996) suggested a *facets of place* approach to developing a theory of place.

Given the diversity of epistemological, ontological, and axiological orientations toward the topic of place, it has been a challenge among researchers to agree on a definition for place
Consider, for example, the following expressions as demonstrations of this diversity: There is no place like home (attachment, identity), Barcelona is my kind of place (geographic locale, culture), come over to my place (ownership), she put him in his place (social hierarchy), an event took place (temporal), and he is in a bad place (psychological emotional distress). Each of these expressions demonstrates a different usage of the word place, as described in the parentheses after each expression (Agnew, 2011; Cresswell, 2004.) One inclusive definition of place is as follows:

It is a combination of visible, tangible elements and invisible qualities concerning a particular geographic setting (Alexander et al., 1977; Lewicka, 2011; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977.) Examples of visible, tangible elements would be interior and exterior land uses, buildings, community centers, parks, landscapes, bike and walking pathways, marketplaces, artscapes, or even a city’s central square (Alexander et al., 1977; Day, 2002a; Najafi & Bin Mohd Shariff, 2011). Intangible elements could include historical associations, values, relationships, narratives, politics, safety, street life, rituals, environmental initiatives, and sensory perceptions (Day, 2002b; Jacobs, 1961; Najafi & Bin Mohd Shariff, 2011; Seamon, 2015; Tuan, 1977). (Stern, 2016a, p. 5)

In this study, place can be understood as a phenomenological, embodied, socially constructed, multi-dimensional concept and process that reveals the “complex relationships between the experience of a place and attributes of that place” (Jorgensen & Steadman, 2006, p. 316).

Places are thus very important because they provide the context within which people lives their lives and make meaning of it (Cresswell, 2004; Manzo, 2005; Relph, 1976; Seamon, 2017; Stern, 2016a; Tuan, 1977). Given the power and ubiquity of place, the experience of it can profoundly affect feelings, thoughts, identities, memories, actions, relationships, and interactions of all kinds (Alexander, 2004; Lewicka, 2011; Manzo, 2005). In essence, place influences all aspects of the human experience (Alexander, Ishikawa, & Silverstein, 1977; Casey, 2009; Relph, 1976; Seamon, 2000a). Whether private or public in nature, or for better or worse, the experience of place is inextricably linked with being human and the shaping of one’s sense of self.
A point of clarification with respect to the selection of place literature included in this review bears mentioning. Because the topic of place is complex, multidisciplinary, and researched from divergent theoretical perspectives, one qualitative and the other quantitative, this review includes primarily qualitative research that is relevant to the study’s topic. Although some quantitative research in environmental psychology is noted (see Patterson & Williams, 2005), sense of place and place attachment have typically been the purview of humanistic geographers, phenomenologists, philosophers, and architects, resulting in the inclusion of mostly qualitative literature from these fields. Additionally, my epistemological and ontological stance informs the literature selected for review. My selections primarily relate to intangible inner and outer phenomena such as feelings, intuitions, values, attitudes, memories, sense of place, place attachment, displacement, place identity, and the experience of one’s self in place.

**Sense of Place and Placelessness**

The term *sense of place* is strongly rooted in a qualitative, humanistic geography, and phenomenological research tradition (Cresswell, 2004; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). These interpretive writings revealed sense of place as holistic, social, elusive, and contextual; a “collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a particular locality” (Williams & Stewart, 1998, p. 19). Sense of place was also associated with distinctive qualities and characteristics (either natural or manmade) and local sentiment.

More recent scholarship has included quantitative research models (such as Patterson & Williams, 2005), which have “attempted to identify distinct and quantifiable dimension of a sense of place” (Biedler & Morrison, 2016, p. 205). Biedler and Morrison (2016) proposed an “overlapping four-dimensional model involving the physical environment, the psychology of the
self, and the sociocultural circumstances, all of which vary over the course of time” (p. 206). They concluded that recent scholarship was focused more on contextually bound, time dependent, socially informed constructs, and less on the role of environmental factors (Biedler & Morrison, 2016).

From their findings, Biedler and Morrison (2016) proposed a simpler, more holistic definition of sense of place: “the overarching transformation of space into place” (p. 212). This definition brings to the fore the necessity of clarifying the distinction between space and place. Whereas space suggests abstraction, un-differentiation, and freedom, place can be understood as belonging, stability, and meaningful (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). Together, the two terms function as a co-dependent construct—place is space made meaningful (Cresswell, 2004).

A previously offered general definition of sense of place includes tangible and intangible elements that contribute to an overarching impression encompassing the way people feel about, sense, assign meaning to, and value a place (Agnew, 1987; Biedler & Morrison, 2016; Stern, 2016a; Tuan, 1977; Williams & Stewart, 1998). Sense of place is sometimes thought to be synonymous with the term spirit of place, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. This is because when most people think about the sense or spirit of a place, they conjure up the atmosphere or ambiance that place invokes, either from having learned or heard about it, or from having been there (Lappin, 2015; Stern 2016a).

Sense of place and spirit of place are essential, integral aspects of powerful, transformative experiences of place. The term spirit of place, or genius loci, was historically considered the guardian spirit that presided over and protected a particular place (Lappin, 2015; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Walter, 1988.) Symbolic animalistic depictions were even included in places to represent primal life forces, transformation, and renewal. In time, the term genius loci
took on the meaning of a particular Geist, unique quality, or spirit of a place. Each place was thought to be endowed with its own character and inherent genius—“an indwelling spark of divine nature through which that person or thing was created” (Lappin, 2015, p. xi). It is this ineffable aspect of place that contributes to powerful experiences. As noted phenomenologist and humanistic geographer David Seamon clarified, “As a phenomenon, genius loci is largely invisible, implicit, and, as a whole, larger than the individual and human parts comprising it. Genius loci is thus, largely unmeasurable” (Seamon, 1982, p. 261). The sense of a place and the spirit of a place are important intrinsic, persistent qualities attributable to the total experience of a place. Places can be said to possess their own independent spirit, their own sense of self, their own genius loci (Lappin, 2015; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Stern, 2016a, Walter, 1988).

Whereas some scholars conceive of sense of place and spirit of place as inherent to place, other scholars suggest that sense of place is a feeling or perception that is held by people, and not by the place itself. An example of this alternative conceptualization is the work of humanistic geographer Doreen Massey, whose term global sense of place suggests a view of place that is open, hybrid, and mobile (Massey, 1994). Massey considered place from four dimensions: “(1) Place as a process, (2) place as defined by the outside, (3) place as site of multiple identities and histories, and (4) a uniqueness of place defined by its interactions” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 74). For Massey, sense of place is both global and local—it is a “meeting place where a particular constellation of social relations comes together in a place” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 74). Massey thus saw place not as a fixed location, but rather, as a permeable, ever-changing, and unbounded construct—as a flexible route, as opposed to a static root (also see Gustafson, 2001). Massey echoes the views of philosopher Susanne Langer, who conceived of place as defined more by concept and culture than geography (Langer, 1953). Recent scholarship on sense of place also
considers the issues of increased mobility, globalization, and its impact on the human–place relationship (Easthope, 2009; Gustafson, 2001).

Another scholar whose work bears mentioning is that of Lucy Lippard (1997) whose book, entitled *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* is relevant to this inquiry. Lippard used the term *multicentered* to describe her views on senses of place, which she explained as having a serial sensitivity to multiple places. Instead of feeling connected (in an exclusively fixed way) to a particular locale through a sense of place, Lippard expressed a paradoxical view on sense of place through the concept of a sense of displacement. Accordingly, instead of then being someone who is “out of place,” one then becomes a person of many places—someone with a sense of multicenteredness in a multicentered society—and someone whose sense of belonging and identity is temporally shaped, but not confined by, a single or multiple locations.

Feeling “in place” or “out of place” in response to the experience of a sense of place has to do with one’s sense of self and identity. This brings me to the concept of authenticity in experiencing a sense of place, or what humanistic geographer Edward Relph (1976) referred to as the experience of *insideness* and *outsideness*. In *Place and Placelessness*, Relph described an authentic experience of a sense of place as having both a depth and intensity of insideness with and of a place—a profound “degree of attachment, involvement, and concern that a person or group has for a particular place” (Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p. 45). Conversely, Relph (1976) described an inauthentic experience of place as

essentially no sense of place, for it involves no awareness of depth and symbolic significance of places and no appreciation of their identities. It is merely an attitude which is socially convenient and acceptable—an uncritically accepted stereotype, an intellectual of aesthetic fashion that can be adopted without real involvement. (p. 82)

Relph (1976) continued,
An inauthentic attitude toward places […] directly or indirectly encourages “placelessness”, that is, a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike and feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience. (p. 90)

For Relph then, the experiences of outsideness and placelessness were the antithesis of insideness, authenticity, and a sense of place. Whether understood as insideness or outsideness, sense of place and placelessness can both be powerful experiences.

Anthropologist Marc Augé shared a perspective similar to Relph on the concept on placelessness. Augé referred to such places as non-places. Examples of non-places are sites that are transient or temporary, and they include places and spaces marked by consumption (such as shopping centers, malls, and big box supermarkets) and mobility (such as freeways, airports, and hotel chains; Augé, 1995; Cresswell, 2004; Stern, 2016a). Augé’s (1995) non-places refers to the kinds of nondescript locales that could be, and typically are, the result of globalization. Sometimes described as soulless, non-places are nonetheless a frequent experience of travelers and commuters; these experiences also impact one’s sense of self, sometimes in subtle but no less deleterious ways.

Each of these kinds of experiences of place, whether positive, negative, or a mix of emotions, entails a relational quality between a person and place. It is both the subjective and objective understanding of the experiencer, in combination with the inherent and ever-changing qualities of a place, that make for the total encounter. Powerful, transformative experiences of place arise out of these conditions; together, sense of place and sense of self are co-influencing and co-evolving (Hauge, 2007; Manzo, 2005; A. Morgan, 2010; Seamon, 2015; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

**Place Attachment**

Research in place attachment by cultural anthropologists Altman and Low (1992) describe place attachment as an individual’s bonding experience with places. This definition
includes beliefs about the cultural, and often symbolic, shared experiences among families, friends, communities, and societies. Although place attachment and sense of place are overlapping concepts, the terms are not interchangeable (Williams & Stewart, 1998). Place attachment specifically includes a strong emotional bond and sense of familiarity with a place, more notably over time, and also felt values and shared meanings with a place (Manzo, 2003; Lewicka, 2011; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1977). Literature on place attachment is relevant to this inquiry because powerful experiences of place, particularly in the early years, invariable shape the self and contribute to identity formation (Giuliani, 2003; Hauge, 2007; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

The ideas behind place attachment originate in the work of John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980, 1988) and his theory on maternal and interpersonal attachment. Bowlby (1988) and Ainsworth (1982) emphasized the importance of making intimate emotional bonds as an essential characteristic of instinctive human nature. Whereas Bowlby (1973) considered attachment to a parental figure part of a larger set of relational systems within the familiar environment, Giuliani (2003) clarified that this same attachment was not predictive of a similar attachment to places.

Nonetheless, early research on place attachment was pursued from cross-disciplinary fields such as psychology, sociology, urban planning, humanistic geography, and anthropology, among others. Urban planners Whyte (1958, 1980) and Jacobs (1961) studied the sociological effects between city dwellers and their environment as a form of collective and interactive “street ballet.” Fried (1963) researched the psychological impact of forced dislocations in urban redevelopments. Bachelard (1969) and Cooper (1974) explored the intimate bond between people and their home, with Cooper (1974) and Cooper Marcus (1995) emphasizing the
dynamic, Jungian link between the house and the self. In *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al., 1977), architect Christopher Alexander and his colleagues identified underlying physical patterns and constellations of places and spaces, which exhibited a noteworthy sense of wholeness and aliveness between humans and their environment. Humanistic geographers Buttinner (1980), Tuan (1974, 1977), Relph (1976), and Seamon (1980) turned their attention to the distinctions between abstract space and meaningful place, noting the human-environment bond and experience of “lifeworlds.”

Place attachment also includes several analogous ideas related to caring deeply for a place, such as *topoanalysis* (Bachelard, 1969), *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974), *fields of care* (Relph, 1976), *biophilia* (Wilson, 1984), *chorophilia* and *topistics* (Walter, 1988), among others. Topoanalysis was a term initially introduced by French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, who applied topoanalysis to describe “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives” (Bachelard, 1969, p. 8). For Bachelard (1969), this term described happy, meaningful places and spaces rich in subjective, sensory, and poetic imagery. Humanistic geographer Yi Fu Tuan (1974) later popularized the term topophilia as an expanded version of topoanalysis. The broader definition encompassed “environmental perceptions, attitudes, values, worldviews, aesthetics, landscapes, cities, wilderness, symbolism, sacredness, imagery, and transcendence—all real and imagined aspects connected to the spirit and love of place and space” (Stern, 2016a, p. 29).

The terms fields of care (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977), biophilia (Wilson, 1984), chorophilia and topistics (Walter, 1988) correspond to the concept of place attachment. As Relph (1976) noted,

The places to which we are most attached are literally fields of care, settings in which we have had a multitude of experiences and which call forth a complex array of affections
and responses…. There is, in fact, a complete commitment to that place, a commitment that is as profound as any that a person can make. (p. 38)

Similarly, Wilson (1984) used the term biophilia to describe a love of life or living systems, suggesting an instinctive bond between humans and other life forms (such as place and planet earth), and Walter (1988) used the terms chorophilia (love of place) and topistics to describe a holistic understanding and appreciative experience of place—one that includes “sensory perceptions, moral judgments, passions, feelings, ideas, and orientations” (p. 21). All of these concepts are expressions of the importance and power of place attachment as an aspect of the experience of place and how it shapes one’s sense of self.

It is worth mentioning that although positive emotions are commonly associated with people-place bonding and place attachment, Tuan (1977), Scannell and Gifford (2010), and Fullilove (1996) noted that negative emotions (such as fear or loss) can also be associated with place, and they too can generate powerful experiences. Transformative experiences often have an aspect that is disorienting and may even feel like a kind of death process. A whole range of emotions can thus be associated with place, sense of place, and place attachment.

A fair amount of scholarship on place attachment, particularly in the last two decades, has been focused on understanding what makes a place sufficiently meaningful that an attachment forms as a result (Lewicka, 2011; P. Morgan, 2010; Patterson & William, 2005). A further clarification suggested and articulated by Schroeder (1991), distinguished between the concepts of meaning and preference, with meaning (as pertaining to a selected landscape) being defined as “thoughts, feelings and memories…associated with it” (p. 13), and preference defined as the type and degree of liking of one landscape versus another.

In a more recent and comprehensive review on place attachment, Lewicka (2011) synthesized the literature on the topic and organized it into three sections: research, method, and
theory. Using a tripartite model of place attachment, which defined three variables of place attachment as person, process, and place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), Lewicka (2011) noted that much research attention has been focused on the person aspect of this model, but less attention has been given to the process and place areas. Results from the current study contribute to research in all three of these areas, as the primary research question included these three aspects: sense of self (person), the shaping of self (process) and powerful experiences (of place). The research sub-questions in this study focused on the relational aspects of person and place with respect to how powerful experiences have formed, informed, and transformed one’s sense of self. Regarding future research, Lewicka (2011) stated a need for process-oriented studies, with an emphasis on “elucidating processes through which people form their meaningful relations with places” (p. 226), and an importance on studying “self-continuity for life-span developmental processes” (p. 226), both of which this study explored.

Phenomenology of Place

Literature on the phenomenology of place is relevant to this inquiry because it brings insights into the multi-dimensional, in-depth approach toward defining and interpreting phenomena—in this case, the phenomena of powerful experiences of place and the shaping of one’s sense of self. The perspective of place, and its counterpart space, as a lived experience can be traced back to the writings of philosophical, religious, and phenomenological scholars such as Buber (1971), Eliade (1959/1987) Bachelard (1969), Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962). These writers each brought a distinctive perspective on the inherent interconnectedness of the human–place relationship. More recent scholarship by contemporary thinkers, some of whom come from additional disciplines such as humanistic geography, psychology, and architecture, includes the work of Relph (1976), Tuan (1977), Norberg-Schulz (1980), Seamon

In *The sacred and The Profane*, noted religious scholar Mircea Eliade distinguished between phenomenological experiences of sacred space, profane space, and “privileged places” (Eliade, 1959/1987, p. 24). Eliade (1959/1987) continued,

There are, for example, privileged spaces, qualitatively different from all others—a man’s birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in his youth. Even for the most frankly nonreligious man, all these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the “holy places” of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality *other* than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life. (p. 24)

In Eliade’s view, sacred spaces and privileged places were powerful, transcendent, and transformative; profane spaces and places were described as homogenous, uniform, and degraded. Eliade asserted that sacred spaces and places originated from the experience of a *sacred center* or *axis mundi*, a central axis point and symbol, which can take the form of a natural or made-made object. Such images, whether found in perceived religious or secular settings, are symbols that function as a reminder of a core universal experience of centeredness, accessible through sacred space and place. “Every Microcosm, every inhabited region, has a Centre; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all” (Eliade, 1991, p. 39).

Examining the house and home as a dwelling place in its “intimate immensity” (p. 183), Bachelard (1969) took a phenomenological approach to reveling in the small details (such as doorknobs, key-holes, and wardrobes) and the larger, dream-inducing lifeworlds of the attic and cellar. *The Poetics of Space* is Bachelard’s (1969) enchanting account of his perceptions and powerful experiences of the home as a central, inhabited space and place from which to dream and imagine.
Seamon (2000a) noted that phenomenology offers a useful perspective for researchers who study the intersections of people, experiences, and the environments. He said that phenomenology offers conceptual language for bridging and reconciling the “difficult tensions between feeling and thinking and between first-hand lived experience and second-hand conceptual accounts of that experience” (Seamon, 2000a, p. 2). Seamon (2000b) concluded:

In the end, the phenomenological enterprise is a highly personal, interpretive venture. In trying to see the phenomenon, it is very easy to see too much or too little. Looking and trying to see are very much an intuitive, spontaneous affair that involves feeling as much as thinking. In this sense, phenomenology might be described as a method to cultivate a mode of seeing that cultivates both intellectual and emotional sensibilities, with the result that understanding may be more whole and comprehensive. (p. 171)

One approach Seamon proposed toward advancing a more holistic understanding of the experience of place was through the application of two conceptual understandings of place, which he referred to analytic relationality and synergistic relationality (Seamon, 2015). Analytic relationality, according to Seamon (2015), “interprets places as sets of interconnected parts and their relationships” (p. 19). In contrast, synergistic relationality “interprets places as integrated, generative fields, the parts of which are only parts as they both sustain and are sustained by the constitution and dynamism of the particular place as a whole” (Seamon, 2015, p. 19). Through an integration of these two ways of seeing place, Seamon proposed a more comprehensive way of making sense of the human–place relationship.

In the spirit of Buber, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, Seamon (2000a, 2000b) has argued for a more holistic and indivisible approach to understanding people and place (and world), seeing them as intimately immersed and entwined. As such, the person-world can be understood as an “undissolvable unity” (Stewart & Mikunas, 1990, p. 9), wherein “person and world [are] intimately part and parcel” (Seamon, 2000a, p. 4). Seamon’s preference for using a phenomenological approach to study the person–place relationship allows for a broad
perspective and “includes bodily, visceral, intuitive, emotional, and transpersonal dimensions” (Seamon, 2000a, p. 4), all of which are relevant to describing and interpreting powerful experiences of place and how they shape one’s sense of self.

In recent scholarship by Seamon (2017) more specifically focused on the built world, Seamon proposed a tripartite model for making sense of experiences of place. Though *lifeworlds* (the tacit, “everyday realm of experiences, actions and meanings” [Seamon, 2017, p. 1]), *atmospheres*, and *environmental wholes*, Seamon’s model is based on a cross-disciplinary synthesis of perspectives from the fields of philosophy, phenomenology, urban planning, architecture, and humanistic geography. This model “may offer one powerful springboard for imagining buildings that invigorate daily living but also evoke wonderment, imagination, elegance, and grace” (Seamon, 2017, p. 15), thereby potentially enabling powerful experiences of place and the shaping of one’s sense of self.

In a robust historical review and commentary on the person-place relationship, philosopher and phenomenologist Edward Casey (1997, 2009) discussed *The Fate of Place* and a revisiting of the topic in *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Casey lamented modern philosophy’s emphasis on space and time, arguing that place should not be subordinated to either. Rather, in a nod toward Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodiment, Casey (2009) emphasized the essential relationship of “being bodily in place” (p. 47) and how embodiment necessarily orients us in place. Casey’s (2009) accounts “articulate an exact and engaged analysis of place more fully…accord[ing] to place a position of renewed respect by specifying its powers to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are” (p. xv).
Another inclusion in this section on place goes to architect, philosopher, and phenomenologist Christopher Alexander, whose efforts as a scholar-practitioner are relevant to this inquiry of how powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of sense. Alexander’s longstanding quest circles around understanding, and then creating a theory about, an aspect of place which he referred to as the *quality without a name*—a sense of rightness, wholeness, generative vitality, and aliveness. Alexander’s early work, crafted in conjunction with colleagues, resulted in a resource book and compendium entitled *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al., 1977). Derived from a decade of studies all over the world, the 253 patterns in this volume lend detailed insight into how and why some places feel more *right* and *whole* than others, as well as how this information might be used for the creation of new places and environments. Thus, “these patterns are not things, but constellations of environment/experience relationships potentially sustaining, through the physical world, a sense of human and environmental well being” (Seamon, 2007, p. 3).

In a 4-volume set entitled *The Nature of Order*, Alexander (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005) furthered his efforts at creating a theory of architecture based on the experience of wholeness, one that sought to reunite “the findings of science” (Alexander, 2006, p. 1) with the process of feeling…and appreciation of the…whole” (Alexander, 2006, p. 1). Indeed, *The Nature of Order* “can be interpreted as a phenomenology of a particular kind of order that Alexander calls *wholeness*, which, whether in nature or human-made, is the ‘source of coherence which exists in any part of the world’” (Seamon, 2007, p. 1). Alexander’s (2006) understanding of wholeness integrated not only thinking and making, but also perceiving, sensing, and feeling, toward an “appreciation of the poetic whole that forms our own existence” (p. 1).
The empirical findings from each of the four volumes contributes different ideas on the phenomenology of wholeness, each one building on the previous book. Although numerous passages are noteworthy and relevant to the topic of this study, I have selected one in particular that bears mentioning. In volume 4, entitled *The Luminous Ground*, Alexander (2004) described nine levels of intensity of the experience of a waterfall, which is a fitting example of a powerful experience of place. Ranging from the mildest level of experience to the most intense, each level possessed its own quality of relationship with the waterfall. In the strongest version, level 9, Alexander described a wholeness composed of living centers—which themselves are part of a living structure—that itself “is entangled with the human self” (Alexander, 2006, p. 9).

Alexander described this strongest version and most powerful experience of a waterfall thus:

> And a stronger version still…is reached when we experience the relationship with the waterfall so that it is not merely that I identify with the waterfall, but that in some fashion I am the waterfall: not merely identification, but actual identity. In this case, when I see the waterfall and feel related to it, I experience the relationship as more fundamental, not merely the “I feel identified with this waterfall,” but something more like “there is some kind of an identity between my self, and the waterfall. My I is really the waterfall. My self and the waterfall are not merely similar, but it feels as if they are the same, as if both are parts of one thing.” (Alexander, 2004, p. 69)

Alexander’s description of a powerful experience of a waterfall can be compared with Buber’s concept of *I-Thou*, Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualistic phenomenology, Seamon’s “person and world intimately part and parcel” (Seamon, 2000a, p. 4), and Heidegger’s *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*.

To conclude this part, several studies on phenomenological experiences of place bear mentioning. A study by Levi (2008) is highly relevant to this research in that it explored the influence of place, space, and environment on group transformational experiences. Although Levi’s (2008) study focused specifically on collective wisdom as an emergent property of transformational experiences, she did interview individuals, and her findings suggest that, at least
in part, group and individual experiences are inextricably linked. Among her findings was “an implicit message that meaning and sense of self are anchored for both individuals and groups in the meaning and feeling of connection that they experience with place” (p. 39).

Nogué i Font (1993) studied the phenomenology of landscape, looking to unearth the essential character of Garroxta, a region in the Pyrenees foothills of Catalonia, Spain. In his findings, Nogué i Font (1993) concluded that despite differences in meanings ascribed to the landscape, there was a common, elemental, and experiential quality to the land that marked “the uniqueness of Garroxta as a thing in itself” (Nogué i Font, 1993; see also Seamon, 2000a, p. 6; Seamon, 2000b, p. 168).

In a study by Million (1992), the researcher examined the phenomenological experience of involuntary displacement due to the construction of a reservoir dam at family homesteads in Alberta, Canada. Million’s (1992) research was also particularly relevant to this study because the researcher delineated various stages of transformation the families went through as they let go of their ranches and attempted to resettle and rebuild their lives. The transformative journeys of the families to some degree mirrored the process of the hero’s journey, which will be discussed later in Section 3 of this literature review on transformative experiences. This concludes the literature review on the phenomenology of the human–place relationship, and its relevance to this study of how powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self.

Summary

This first section of Chapter 2 on place included four parts: facets of place, sense of place and placelessness, place attachment, and phenomenology of place. The person–place relationship was briefly reviewed from an historical perspective. In “facets of place,” an overview was provided of some of the diverse interdisciplinary research traditions and definitions of place. In
“sense of place and placelessness,” formative and contemporary definitions of sense of place were reviewed, as well as some distinctions on the less tangible dimensions that contribute to the ineffable qualities of the spirit of a place. The concepts of insideness and outsideness were also discussed. In the part on “place attachment,” the literature on emotional bonding between people and place was reviewed, and the tripartite model of place attachment was introduced. Finally, in “phenomenology of place,” the scholarship on various phenomenological, experiential, and philosophical perspectives of place were reviewed.

**Sense of Self**

This section of Chapter 2, entitled “Sense of Self,” focuses on the literature in self and identity and is divided into three parts: concept and definition of sense of self, self-concept, and identity.

**Concept and Definition of Self**

The term sense of self has its roots in philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Attempting to answer the age-old question of “Who am I,” Indian philosophers and theologians as far back as the 8th century B.C.E. reflected on this question in the ancient texts of The Upanishads. Not long after that, in the 5th century B.C.E. in China, the Tao te Ching and the philosophy of Buddha addressed concerns about the self and reflexive consciousness (Leary & Tangney, 2012). Greek history is replete with philosophical enquiry on this topic, as exemplified by the inscription Know Thyself on the ancient Greek Temple of Apollo.

For almost the next two millennia, discussions about the self occurred primarily in religious and theological contexts, but thereafter Enlightenment philosophers once again turned their attention back to the concern of the self (Leary & Tangney, 2012). It was Enlightenment philosopher John Locke (1979) who, in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, is
attributed with modern conceptions of the self and identity. Locke first defined the self as possessing a continuity of consciousness. Challenging Cartesian philosophy, Locke suggested that the mind was a kind of blank slate wherein knowledge was acquired through two sources—(a) sensation, and (b) perception through the operation of one’s own mind, which Locke, according to Russell (1945), referred to as *internal sense*—a concept known as empiricism.

Locke was concerned with a foremost philosophical question labelled *The Problem of Persistence*, which is concerned with how the self, and one’s identity, remains the same over time. The issue is one of clarifying the essence and persistence of personal identity. If the self is a collection of constantly changing aspects, such as the physical body, the mind, emotions, or other characteristics, which of these aspects refers to *me*, and which refers to *I*? Which *me* pertains to who I have been, who I will become, and who I am now? Locke suggested that personal identity was comprised of more than the physical body alone and that values, inclinations, and temperament accounted for a sameness in consciousness.

In *The Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890), the father of American psychology William James devoted a chapter of his book to “the Consciousness of Self.” The Jamesian theory of self was divided into two main categories: the “I” self and the “Me” self. The “I” self was called *The Pure Ego*, and it was considered the thinking self and the soul of a person, which together comprised what is now thought of as the mind. For James, it was the “I” self that provided continuity through an ongoing stream of consciousness, thereby linking one’s past, present, and future selves.

The “Me” self was composed of three aspects of the self—*The Material Self, The Social Self*, and *The Spiritual Self*. Aspects of the “me” self were the result of one’s experiences. The core of the material self was the body, but it also included one’s family and material possession.
The social self depended and varied based on one’s social context; different social selves could emerge depending on who one was with, the situational social hierarchy, or other context dependent circumstances. The spiritual self was thought to be one’s subjective and most intimate self. The spiritual self includes personality traits, core values, and one’s conscience, all of which were thought to remain consistent throughout the lifetime. The spiritual self was the introspective, constant, essential aspect of one’s self (Epstein, 1973). As Leary and Tangney (2012) noted, “James laid a strong conceptual foundation for the study of the self, touted the importance of the self for understanding human behavior, and set a strong precedent for regarding the self as a legitimate topic of scholarly investigation” (p. 2).

The issue of what exactly comprises the self is one that scholars and theorists in the last century have grappled with considerably; the results, not surprisingly, have been widely varied hypotheses and a lack of consensus on the meanings and definitions of the self (Leary & Tangney, 2012). Some key theorists included Cooley (1902), who, with his term the “looking-glass self,” “described our use of how we think others perceive us as a mirror for perceiving ourselves” (Myers, 2010, p. 41). Cooley (1902) expanded on James’s idea of the introspective aspect of the self by including an interactive component, based on the sociological idea that the self is shaped and changed through interaction. Mead (1934) and Blumer (1937) extended Cooley’s looking glass self into what later became known as symbolic interactionism, which is a sociological theory based on the idea that individuals develop, change, and assign meanings through a social process of interactions with “others,” be they people, objects, events, ideas, or places. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Irving Goffman (1959) also brought forth the idea that the presentational self and the psychological self were intertwined (Leary & Tangney, 2012). Numerous other theorists, whose work also contributed to an understanding of
the self, according to Leary and Tangney (2012), include Allport’s (1955) trait theory concept, Sullivan’s (1953) self-system, and Horney’s (1950) theory of self, among many others.

Moving in the direction away from psychoanalysis and behaviorism in the 20th century, humanistic psychologists Carl Rogers (1951) and Abraham Maslow (1954) brought an important phenomenological and existential lens to the term sense of self, with the self understood as the inner psychological entity that is the center or subject of a person’s experience (Leary & Tangney, 2012, p. 5). Focusing on a drive toward optimal functioning and self-actualization, these and other humanistic psychologists pursued a holistic approach to human existence and human potential, toward a phenomenology of selfhood. With an emphasis on meaning-making, creativity, spirituality, and self-exploration, the humanistic psychology lens strongly influences the definition of sense of self in this study. Arons and Richards (2012) noted that the “self” in the humanistic tradition is “not a static object but rather is, at once, both an agency for and a renewing product of meaningful change. It is self-organizing, open, and responsive….This self is by nature creative, conscious, and dynamically transforming” (p. 162).

The literature on sense of self is informed by three ways of knowing: subjective knowing, objective knowing, and a relatedness way of knowing (C. Rogers, 1961, 1963). Sense of Self has previously been defined in Chapter 1 as an evolving construct including both subjective and objective dimensions. The subjective dimension is an internal process in which one has the sensation, feeling, or impression that an event is happening inside oneself, and that experience is congruent with who one knows oneself to be, either partially or wholly. The subjective self is the self as I, a subjective knower (James, 1890) which arises out of a kind of felt-sense. Gendlin (1978) described a felt-sense as “sensing an implicit complexity, a wholistic sense of what one is working on” (p. 52), or who one knows oneself to be or potentially to be.
The objective dimension, which understands the self as *me* (the object that is known) (James, 1890), is composed of three aspects: one’s view of one’s self (*self-image*), the value one places on one’s self (*self-esteem* or *self-worth*), and what one wishes one was really like (*ideal self*; C. Rogers, 1959). Self-image includes roles and personality traits. Self-esteem refers to the extent to which one values one’s self. Self-esteem is said to fluctuate and vary in stability (Leary & Tangney, 2012; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Oyserman et al., 2012). The ideal self may or may not be consistent with the actual experiences of the self—this potential gap is referred to as incongruence. Sense of self is dynamic and complex because it involves the inner and outer self, as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

The concept of self-differentiation also informs one’s sense of self. Individuals are said to be poorly differentiated or well-differentiated within a family structure. A person with a poorly differentiated self is heavily dependent on the acceptance and approval of others, resulting in accommodating or controlling responses and self-adjustments toward appeasing others or pressuring them to conform. Conversely, a well self-differentiated self is able, in the face of challenge, criticism, or conflict, to maintain a balance between emotion and intellect, while still being able to maintain one’s own feelings, perceptions, thoughts, values, and beliefs, inclusive of outside forces or external influences (Bowen, 1985).

Leary and Tangney (2012) identified three ways the self is, in fact, somehow involved in: (1) People’s experiences of themselves (though a self is not needed for consciousness per se); (2) their perceptions, thought, and feelings about themselves; and (3) their deliberate efforts to regulate their own behavior. (p. 6)

These can be comparatively understood as a focus on attention (1), cognition (2), and regulation (3), however all three of these features of the self “are intimately interconnected, with pervasive links to emotion and motivation” (Leary & Tangney, 2012, p. 10). The one essential quality that virtually all scholarship related to the self involves is that of reflexive thinking
A sense of self assumes the capacity for reflexive thinking, which is the ability to take one’s self as the object of one’s attention. Reflective consciousness also allows for a “change in the organization of the self” (C. Rogers, 1951, p. 390).

In all of its multifarious complexity, sense of self can be thought of as an umbrella term; Baumeister (1998) concluded, “self is not really a single topic at all, but rather an aggregate of loosely related subtopics” (p. 681). Leary and Tangney (2012) identified five ways in which behavioral and social scientists use the word self, and its variations: (a) self as the total person, (b) self as personality, (c) self as experiencing subject, (d) self as beliefs about oneself, (e) self as executive agent. Contemporary scholars have used terms such as self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-image, self-identity, self-control, self-management, ideal self, and possible selves, among others, to describe facets of the self, and these terms generally assume the focus on the self as object. Some of these key terms will be discussed next.

**Self-Concept**

A subset of sense of self, self-concept refers to how someone perceives, thinks about, and evaluates her or himself—one’s belief about one’s self, including the attributes about who and what the self is (Baumeister, 1999). “Self-concepts are a multi-faceted phenomenon, a set of cognitive structures that can include content, attitudes, or evaluative judgments that are used to make sense of the world, focus attention on one’s goals, and protect one’s basic sense of self-worth” (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 72). Structural aspects of self-concept may include an orientation that is individualistic (the me self), collectivistic (the us self), proximal (the now self), distal other (future self), immersed (mind’s-eye self) or the observer’s (eyes of others) self (Oyserman et al., 2012). Self-concept involves mental concepts (self-schemas) of who one is, has been, and might become. This includes self-judgments, which are
operationalized as self-esteem (sense of self-worth) and self-efficacy (how competent one feels on a task; Bandura, 1977). The social self also contributes to self-concept in that one comes to know one’s self through the responses and reactions of others in the context of social situations (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Myers, 2010; Stryker, 1980). Self-concept is a combination of self-esteem, self-knowledge, and the social self.

People self-categorize in their structural self-concepts, and they can have multiple self-concepts. As previously noted, people may think of themselves from different perspectives, as an individual or as part of a group, or they may focus on themselves at the current time in their life, or from the view of who they once were, where they once lived, or who they might become as a possible future self. These different self-concepts may be mentally organized and stored as information based on common domains, for example, race or ethnicity, gender, social standing, religion, or age. How self-concepts are organized within the self may affect the efficiency and accuracy with which information is processed and recalled (Oyserman et al., 2012). The implication of greater facility and memory recall is that “people will act in ways that fit their schemas” (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 73), a schema being a self-defined, mental template of memories, beliefs, and characteristics by which one self-organizes one’s sense of self (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Myers, 2010).

Another issue that researchers study is whether people’s self-concepts feel related to one another or are congruent with one another, or whether people feel their different aspects of themselves function more independently. Relatedness among self-concepts, as well as their organization, may be self-evaluated as positive or negative, which in turn can affect self-regulation, self-judgment, self-attitude, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Dweck, 2000; Oyserman et al., 2012). Still another aspect of self-concept is one’s future self or possible
selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the vision of which provides a conceptual link and incentives between the current self and future motivation. Powerful experiences of place may contribute to and shape self-concept, possible selves, and many other aspects of one’s sense of self.

Contemporary scholars view self-concept as a “working self concept” as opposed to the self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987). The self is neither static nor fixed, rather, it is perhaps best viewed as “a continually active, shifting array of accessible self-knowledge” (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 306). Self-concept is constructed through one’s internal self-reflexive processes and external (social and other) experiences, making it both stable and malleable (Arons & Richards, 2012; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Myers, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012). Both self-concept and identity theorists agree that multiple self-concepts and identities rely on a variety of representations—representations that are not just verbal propositions or depictions of traits and demographic characteristics. Rather, representations of self may be cognitive and/or affective; they may be in verbal, image, neural, or sensorimotor form; they represent the self in the past and future as well as the here-and-now; and they are of the actual self and of the possible self. Some are organized into structures that contain both a well-elaborated knowledge base and production rules for how to behave when certain conditions are met. Other self-conceptions may be more tentative, constructed on the spot for a particular social interaction. (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 307)

The multiplicity characteristic of self-concept shares a similarity with the next topic, that of identity, or rather, multiple identities.

**Identity Theories**

Erikson (1951, 1968) used the term identity in ways synonymous to self-concept, describing identity as a series of developmental processes and constructions through explorations and commitments (over the life cycle; also see Marcia, 1966; Oyserman et al., 2012). However, other theorists in the social and psychological domains conceptualize the term identity as “a way of making sense of some aspect or part of self-concept” (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 73). Identity
can thus be thought of as a subset, or a nested element, within self-concept, and self-concept as
nested within sense of self (Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012).

When consider the diversity of approaches toward understanding identity, identity
formation, and identity construction, it is worth noting that even within individual disciplines, the
topic of identity can be contested. For example, Hauge (2007) noted that within the
psychological literature alone, identity can be viewed from at least five broad categories:

The most well known psychological identity theories among the public at large are
psychodynamic theories (with Freud’s psychoanalysis as one of the main origins). However, these theories are often seen as the most controversial in academic psychology
(see for example Frosh, 2006). Psychodynamic theories focus on unconscious conflicts
and motivation, inferiority feelings, defense mechanisms, and psychosocial crisis.
Cognitive theories focus on how self-relevant information is stored, structured and
retrieved (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Social learning theories focus on agency, self-
efficacy, locus of control, and self-regulation. Humanistic/existential theories focus on
self-actualization, personal constructs, meaning, responsibility, and personal myths
(McMartin, 1995). The last main group of identity theories focuses on the interpersonal
aspects of identity, the social and cultural influence on how we see ourselves (Leary &
Tangney, 2003). (Hauge, 2007, p. 4)

In the fields of social psychology and sociology, the common usage of the term identity,
not unlike the terms self-concept and place, also “belies considerable variability in both its
conceptual meaning and its theoretical role. Even when consideration is restricted to sociology
and social psychology, variation is still considerable” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284). A general
overview of the term identity in these two fields can be understood in three ways: (a) as the
culture or ethnicity of a people; (b) as part of identification with a social category, collectivity, or
social movement, as noted in the work of Tajfel (1982), and social identity theory; and (c) in
reference to parts of the self and the meanings ascribed connected with different roles individuals
might play in society, as noted in the tradition of symbolic interactionism and the work of
Stryker (1980) and Stryker and Burke (2000).
Research traditions on identity in the two domains of social psychology and sociology typically fall into two categories: Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory (Hogg et al., 1995). These theories share similarities but also differ in how they conceptualize identity. Researchers of both theories indicate that the self is reflexive in that it can observe itself as an object and can categorize, classify, and compare itself to others in particular ways. Theorists also agree that the socially constructed self “mediates the relationship between social structure or society and individual social behavior” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 262). Whether through roles, norms, stereotypes, social or group memberships, diverse and multiple identities within the self emerge as a response to different situations and contexts. Groups associated with identity include race, gender, nationality/ethnicity, religion, social class, sexual orientation, and culture, among others. These two approaches to identity will be discussed next.

**Social identity theory.** Rooted in social psychological theory, social identity theory sets out to explain multi-faceted individual identity through group processes and intergroup relations (Hogg et al., 1995; Tajfel, 1982). Social identity theory posits that a social category to which one belongs (e.g., nationality, political, or religious affiliation) provides a definition of “who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is part of the self-concept” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259).

Tajfel (1982) concluded there are three main concepts involved in social identity theory: (a) social categorization, wherein individuals are categorized into groups based on characteristics (e.g., in-group similarities or out-group differences); (b) social identification, in which individuals adopt the identity of the group; and (c) social comparison and positive distinctiveness, in which individuals seek positive social identities by comparing themselves with in-group or out-group characteristics with the goal of establishing one’s superiority to improve
one’s self-image, self-esteem, rank, or status. Owens et al. (2010), further clarifying Tajfel’s work, argued that social contexts “elicit certain identities and shape their meanings” (p. 478) and the situation and culture in which an individual finds themselves is more central to identity than any internalized aspect or characteristic of that individual (Hogg et al., 1995; Myers, 2010; Owens et al., 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012; Tajfel, 1982). Social identity theory is thus more focused on social identification and the process of self-categorization through societal norms and stereotypes.

Identity theory. By contrast, the focus of identity theory, which is rooted in microsociological theory, is to explain identity through individuals’ role-related behaviors (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Evolving out of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), identity theorist argue that the self consists of a collection of identities, each of which is based on occupying a particular role, thus identity is linked to the various roles one occupies. Role identities are said to influence behavior in that each role has a set of associated meanings and expectations of the self (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The concept of identity salience is important to identity theory because higher salience attached to one identity over another influences how much effort is put into each role (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity salience refers to the strength of affiliation and sentiments of belonging or connection that one has with the larger culture. Identities that comprise the self are ranked in a hierarchy of salience: the higher the salience of a particular identity, the “greater the probability of behavioral choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286).

Variations among scholars within identity theory follow two complementary, but distinct lines of thought. The first, reflected in the work of Stryker (1980), concentrates on examining how external social structures “affect the structure of self and how structure of the self influences
social behavior” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). The second, reflected in the work of Burke and colleagues (see Burke & Reitzes, 1981), focuses on the internal processes as they affect social behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In combination these two approaches are complementary; “Each provides a context for the other: the relation of social structures to identities influences the process of self-verification, while the process of self-verification creates and sustains social structures” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284). Both strands of identity theory, as well as social identity theory, are relevant to this study in that the factors influencing identity, whether internally focused or externally directed, are involved in the shaping and formation of one’s sense of self through socially situated contexts such as place.

Ongoing research within identity theory and social identity theory addresses some of the yet unresolved areas for future research on the relationship between social identity and place. Bernardo and Palma-Oliviera (2013) applied social identity theory in an urban context to examine place belonging as an aspect of place identity. An organizational study by Reicher (2007) considered how spatial arrangements played a key role in the definition of work social identity, and Knight and Haslam (2009) examined how personalization of place and the ability to control one’s work-space within an organizational setting impacted sense of belonging and productivity. In a study by Millward, Haslam, and Postmes (2007) patterns of team and organizational identification among groups of employees were examined through desk usage. Depending on whether employees had either been assigned their own desk or had been required to “hot-desk” (a form of desk-sharing), results showed greater identifications with respectively their team or the larger organization, and in both cases place (desk-usage) was shown to impact identification preference. Therefore, although place identity has historically been a lesser studied
area within social identity theory, as Haslam, Ellemers, Reicher, Reynolds, and Schmitt (2010) noted,

Social identity not only gives people a sense of belonging…but also furnishes them with a sense of where they belong. Appeals to social identity…are therefore powerful regulators of people’s spatial behavior—determining not only where they move in the world, but the very worlds they create. In an era where our relationship with the environment is coming under ever closer scrutiny (but in which only limited attention is paid to the social-psychological dimensions of this relationship), the significance of this point is hard to underestimate. (p. 369)

Dissatisfaction with aspects of social identity theory led to the development of a model and theory of identity process.

**Identity process theory.** Breakwell (1986, 1992, 1993, 2010) proposed that identity is dynamic and change is negotiated through three processes: that of “identity assimilation (maintaining self-consistency), identity accommodation (making changes in the self), and identity balance (maintaining a sense of self but changing when necessary)” (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2003, p. 313). Breakwell (1986) proposed that identity should be conceptualized as a living being dynamically moving through time and developing through social, physical, and other contexts (D. Rogers, 2013; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

What makes identity process theory (IPT) relevant to this study is that it provides some evidence for the relationship between place and identity (Breakwell, 1986; Bowe, 2012; D. Rogers, 2013; Speller, 2000, Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). With few noted exceptions, theories such as social identity theory and identity theory do not specifically do this, despite their acknowledgment of the importance of situated context for identity construction, continuity, and malleability. IPT has been used as the basis for several studies in place identity and place-attachment research; some of these will be mentioned in turn.
Within IPT, the concepts of identity assimilation, accommodation, and balance can be likened to the experience of what occurs for immigrants or expatriates when they move to a new place. Identity is formed, informed, and transformed in the process of moving and living in a new environment. Within this new context, and through self-reflexive inquiry and situated social interactions, one’s identity undergoes an assimilation-accommodation process. Previously foreign or “other” elements become subject to identity re-evaluation. For example, new elements may be absorbed, such as personal (values, attitudes, or style), social (interpersonal networks or group memberships) or spatial aspects (proxemics, scale, or human-environment interfacing) which then provokes an adjustment to one’s existing identity structure. New input is evaluated and either accommodated (causing change to the existing identity structure) or not. In this way, identity change is a fluid, dynamic process of adoption and integration.

In addition, IPT proposes four principles (originating in social psychology) which guide assimilation, accommodation, and balance behaviors, and that can be applied to situated environmental contexts. These are self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, and self-efficacy (Breakwell, 1986, 1993; D. Rogers, 2013; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Each of these aspects will next be discussed.

Breakwell (1993) indicated that the first principle of identity is self-esteem, which is concerned with a person’s feelings of self-worth and social value. As noted in social identity theory and identity theory, individuals will seek to achieve and maintain positive self-esteem and self-conception, and this desire is a basic tenet of every identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995; Myers, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

The second principle of identity in IPT is the continuity principle, wherein an individual will seek what Erikson called “persistent sameness with oneself” (as cited in Breakwell, 1993,
Continuity within identity allows for growth, change, and to some extent, inconsistency as part of the developmental process, with the assumption that change is subjectively congruent within the same identity (Breakwell, 1993). In terms of continuity of identity as it is applied to the self-environment relationship and the IPT model, Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) discussed two types of identity continuity, “place-referent continuity” and “place-congruent continuity.” Place-referent continuity refers to place as a consistent reference point, backdrop, and specific locale of emotional significance for past experiences and actions, such that one maintains a sense of “coherence and continuity in one’s self-conceptions” (Korpela, 1989, p. 251; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p. 207).

Whereas place-referent continuity is focused on specific places, place-congruent continuity “refers to the maintenance of continuity via characteristics of places which are generic and transferable from one place to another” (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p. 208). The distinction is that the congruence of one’s identity is achieved through the “self as a specific type of person” (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p. 208), for example, an urbanite or a small town person. Place-congruent continuity is values based, with individuals seeking congruence through environments and places that match their values (D. Rogers, 2013; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

The third principle of identity is distinctiveness, wherein an individual strives for uniqueness and personal differentiation, not unlike social identification. The principle suggests a push toward difference, but not total distinctiveness (Breakwell, 1993). With respect to place identity, this could manifest as an identification with a particular neighborhood or locale, suggesting individuals use place identifications as a way of ascribing specific attributes or as a means of conveying social status (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).
The fourth principle of identity is that of self-efficacy. Based on social learning theory, Bandura (1977) described self-efficacy as a measure of personal agency wherein an individual believes in their capabilities to meet situational demands. With respect to particular environments or places, this would refer to an individual’s ability to carry out their daily activities efficaciously and manage or “judge whether a setting supports their goals and purposes” (Winkel as cited in Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996, p. 208). These four principles, in conjunction with assimilation, accommodation, and balance behaviors, offer an applicable model through IPT for understanding identity and sense of self in the context of place.

IPT has been used in several studies as a framework for analyzing the relationship between place and identity or place and attachment. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) applied it to an urban renewal study in a residential neighborhood in the London Docklands, wherein changes were occurring to the social, environmental, and economic environments. Speller (2000) used the model to investigate the impact on participants’ identities in an enforced relocation to determine whether and how identities were enhanced or threatened. D. Rogers (2013) applied the framework to examine the narratives of self-initiated expatriates, exploring how environmental changes influenced self-concept development and personal growth. Devine-Wright and Lyons (1997) applied IPT to the construction of national identities in Ireland. The next section reviews a closely related topic: the scholarship on place identity.

**Place identity.** Aspects of identity that are specifically linked with place are referred to as place identity. The literature on place identity is highly relevant to this study as it relates to how experiences of and affiliations with place may have formed, informed, or transformed one’s sense of self. Whereas literature on identity from several fields, including psychology and sociology, have thus far emphasized intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social group processes, all
of which are relevant to identity, with a few exceptions, these approaches do not explicitly consider “the influence of the physical settings that are inherently part of any socialization context on self-identity” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 58).

An oversight among most identity theorists is that they have neglected to specifically include the role of environment and physical context on identity formation (Bernardo & Palma-Oliveira, 2013; Hauge, 2007; Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Some theorists assert that social identity theory can be applied to setting and place, and that the theory does not rule out environment. Although a few more recent studies in social identity theory have hinted at the role of place in identity (see Haslam et al., 2010), for the most part, place identity is viewed as a smaller subset of social identity theory. Arguing for the need for a separate theory of place identity, comparable to social identity theory, Proshansky et al. (1983) clarified, “the subjective sense of self is defined and expressed not simply by one’s relationship to other people, but also by one’s relationships to the various physical settings that define and structure day-to-day life” (p. 58).

Indeed, it could be argued that the development and ongoing construction of one’s identity and sense of self is influenced by not only individual and social factors, but to some degree, by innumerable relationships within which one is part (Proshansky et al., 1983), all of which are embedded in place (Haslam et al., 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). This could include other notions connected with place, such as objects or things, which are imbued with meanings in and of place.

In *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) studied the roles and meanings of household objects within the domestic environment. Among the findings, the authors discussed the various ways individuals
ascribed and cultivated “psychic energy” in the transaction between an object and the self. Although this study did not specifically focus on the idea that place (home in this case) and identity are linked, the authors indicated, “Things…shape the identity of their users” (p. 1), and one could interpret the home itself as a thing or object, only of a different scale. Further widening the conceptual and physical boundaries of place identity through the concept of territoriality, Altman (1975) and Brower (1980) considered the effect of spatial boundaries, possessiveness, and appropriation of places on identity formation.

Extending Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s ideas further, Belk (1992) suggested “to be attached to certain of our surroundings is to make them a part of our extended self” (p. 38), with the caveat that “the basis for attachment is emotional rather than simply functional” (Belk as cited in Belk, 1992, p. 38). Belk also noted other “things” that referenced place identity and environmental bonds, including tangible and intangible associations, such as gifts, souvenirs, and mementos from places, which may take on a sacred quality. “In these cases, the sacralizing mechanism is contagion from the proximity of the object to a special time, place, event, or person” (Belk, 1992, p. 40). Items from travel experiences and favorite vacations also serve to help “construct, rather than simply preserve an identity” (Belk, 1992, p. 40). Belk further noted the role of collective possessions and collective memories as aspects of the extended self, for example, national monuments and parks, historical locations, cemeteries, theme parks, and pilgrimage sites as places that are central to people’s identities. Such locales and experiences serve to draw people to “these magical and symbolic places in an attempt to transcend our daily lives or discover deeper levels of our own selves” (Belk, 1992, p. 44).

Places and interactions with different forms of place-related “otherness” can thus be said to serve toward maintaining and transforming self-identity (Korpela, 1989). Referencing
Proshansky et al. (1983), Korpela (1989) indicated that identity is maintained through the perceived stability of place and space and is validated by “the individual’s belief in his or her own continuity over time” (p. 243). Despite the fact that place is often perceived as a backdrop, albeit tacit (Casey, 2009; Proshansky et al., 1983; Relph, 1976), place and identity are co-affecting, because as one’s identity and sense of self adapts in response to changing social and environmental conditions, so too does the relationship with place. Thus, place identity can be conceived as an evolving, dynamic relationship, one that includes both stable, enduring continuities and adaptive, malleable characteristics (Hauge, 2007; Proshansky et al., 1983; Speller, 2000; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The transactional view of settings by Stokols and Shumaker (1981) echoes this perspective of a reciprocal relationship between place and people, because it focuses on the interface between the two (Hauge, 2007).

As a subset of self and identity, Proshansky et al. (1983) defined place identity as broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience, which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the “environmental past” of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person’s biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs (p. 59).

Whereas this definition by Proshansky et al. (1983) has characteristics that share similarities with the description of place attachment, discussed earlier in this literature review in Section 1, there is dispute among scholars as to what distinguishes place identity from place attachment. Giuliani (2003) stressed “the difficulty of deciding exactly when place attachment becomes strong enough to be defined as an aspect of identity, or “place-identity” (Hauge, 2007, p. 2). Speller (2000) concurred, clarifying that a variety of overlapping terms are used to describe place identity, including place-attachment (Low & Altman, 1992; Lewicka, 2011), place belongingness
(Proshansky et al., 1983), place dependence (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981), and place identification (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Schneider, 1987), making them empirically and theoretically more difficult to separate (Hauge, 2007).

Although there is generally agreement that place identity and place attachment are closely related terms, both linked to people’s emotional bonds with places, Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, and Hess (2007) and Lewicka (2008) suggested these are two different concepts (Bernardo & Palma-Oliviera, 2013). Hernandez et al. (2007) concluded that place attachment precedes the formation of place identity, and thus,

Place attachment is an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe. Place identity, however, has been defined as a component of personal identity, a process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place. (Hernandez et al., 2007, p. 310)

In terms of offering theoretical clarification toward a theory of place identity, Proshansky et al. (1983) also discussed place identity with respect to positive and negative valence.

Place-identity is theoretically conceived of...as clusters of positively and negatively valenced cognitions of physical settings...the places and spaces a child grows up in, those that he or she comes to know, prefer, and seek out or avoid also contribute significantly to self-identity. (p. 74)

Proshansky et al. (1983) used the term “place-belongingness,” which they suggested was a subset of place identity, and which they deemed occurred as a result of positively valenced cognitions (which were outweighed by negatively valenced cognitions). It is not entirely clear how place belongingness differs from recent definitions of place attachment. One suggestion is that place belongingness develops as a result of “being immersed in a given setting for long periods of time, developing new or improved environmental skills in them, and above all learning new social roles (e.g., parent, spouse)...in the adult stages of the lifecycle” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 76). Place attachment has been associated with the early formative years of
infancy and childhood (Giuliani, 2003); place belongingness may offer an alternative term for
the development of positively valenced place identity over the lifespan (Proshansky & Fabian,
1987).

The theoretical framework on place identity introduced by Proshansky et al. (1983) has
been deemed an important contribution, although the construct is less developed than other
identity theories, and there is scant documentation on how the theory has been tested empirically
(Bernardo & Palma-Oliviera, 2013; Hauge, 2007; Korpela, 1989; Speller, 2000. Rather, the place
identity theory has been used as a heuristic starting point in the absence of a more developed
theoretical framework (Hauge, 2007; Speller, 2000; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

As previously noted, some researchers have used the concepts of Proshansky et al.’s
(1983) place identity theory in conjunction with social identity theory and variations on it, or
with IPT as a basis for their research on the place–environment relationship. For example, based
on social psychological work on self-concept, Lalli (1992) presented “a systematic analysis of
the theoretical traditions (including cognitive, phenomenological, and sociological perspectives)
of the work on place identity” (Lalli, 1992, p. 285) and offered a framework and a measuring
instrument (the Urban Identity Scale) for conceptualizing urban-related identity and
identification. That model included five factors: external evaluation, continuity with personal
past, general attachment, perception of familiarity, and commitment.

The work of Hormuth (1990) also bears mentioning. Using the nomenclature of an
ecology of the self, Hormuth (1990) proposed “an ecological perspective on the self-concept”
(p. 1), which he conceived of as similar to the idea of place identity. Hormuth specifically
applied his research to the field of relocation to study changes in the person–environment
relationship. Hormuth (1990) argued that the construction of the self is facilitated through
interactions and influences related to the physical and social environment. Hormuth (1990) suggested that others, objects, and places, in conjunction with the self, provide a total environment within which stability and change contribute to self-concept (D. Rogers, 2013). Some of Hormuth’s ideas are compatible with the work of Belk (1992) and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), who included tangible and intangible associations as factors influencing place identity.

Hull, Lam, and Vigo (1994) conducted a study on place identity using the foundational ideas of Prochansky et al.’s theory, but as their approach included symbols of the self, they modeled their study after the research by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) that focused on the meanings ascribed to things within the home. Hull et al.’s (1994) focus was on the loss of place features outside the home and in and around respondents’ neighborhoods following the devastation of a hurricane. Respondents articulated a variety of losses impacting their identities, including physical, social, and emotional factors, as well as important meanings, symbols, and memories they associated with their identities and place. Hull et al.’s study is a noteworthy inclusion in this review because it focuses on the impact of a powerful experience of place on identity and one’s sense of self.

Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira (2013) concluded there are at least three different ways in which place identity has been conceptualized, out of which three domains of research have emerged. The first domain follows the line of Prochansky et al. (1983) and Belk (1992), wherein place “can be experienced as part of the self, as a self-extension” (Belk, 1992, p. 37). This aspect can also be found in the IPT model, where it is referred to as an aspect of place–referent continuity, based on an emotional attachment with a place over time such that identity and place become fused. Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira’s (2013) second perspective relates to congruence,
and includes the previously described concept within IPT of place-congruent continuity, which relates to values, attitudes, and behavioral dispositions that serve to preserve one’s identity as a particular type of person, such as an urbanite or other characteristics with which one self-identifies (D. Rogers, 2013; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira’s (2013) third approach has been the understanding of place identity as it relates to the emotional connection with place. This can be seen as equivalent to the concept of place attachment although both terms overlap and are used interchangeably.

The point is that numerous models have been applied, modified, and conceived to support greater research in place identity and the possible need for a theory; the development of a comprehensive, integrative model is still in process. Speller, Lyons, and Twigger-Ross (2002) suggested the need for ongoing clarification and greater theoretical exploration on the link between place and identity. Hauge (2007) offered that it may be beneficial to think of place identity as “a horizontal line in a matrix of identity manifestations and identity categories…it is in any case essential to see the different factors in a mutual relation to each other” (p. 9). The hope for this study was that it provide further research and findings supporting the link between powerful experiences of place and how they may have formed, informed, or transformed one’s sense of self.

Summary

This second section of the literature review on “Sense of Self” was divided into three parts. The first part gave an overview of the term and concept of sense of self. In the second part, entitled “Self-Concept,” the literature is compared with dimensions and nuances of what distinguishes self-concept from other aspects of the self. In the third part, entitled “Identity,” different psychosocial theories and processes about identity are reviewed. Distinctions were
drawn between the literature on social identity theory and identity theory, each of which respectively take a psychological or sociological orientation toward identity. ITP was also included and reviewed in this section. The last segment on identity, entitled “Place Identity,” suggests where this particular study fits within the current literature.

**Powerful Experiences**

This third and final section of the literature review is composed of three parts. Part 1, entitled “Powerful Transformative Experiences” lends an overview to the topic of powerful transformative experiences, clarifying what is meant by the terms and how they relate to the subject of this study. Part 2, entitled “Perspectives of Transformative Experiences,” includes an historical and theoretical review of the concept of powerful transformative experiences. In Part 3, entitled “Types and Dimensions of Transformative Experiences,” various types and dimensions of transformative experiences are discussed, generally ranging along a continuum from nadir experiences to peak experiences and beyond. This chapter concludes with a summary of the literature on powerful transformative experiences and how one’s sense of self may be shaped by them in the context of place.

**Powerful Transformative Experiences: Definitions**

In Chapter 1, the key terminology “powerful,” “experience,” “transformative,” and “powerful experience” had been defined as follows: The term *powerful* (n.d.) is synonymous with the words potent, influential, significant, strong, and important. The term *experience* (n.d.) refers to “something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through”; “an act or process of directly perceiving events or reality”; “the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation.” The term *transformative* “can be understood as a marked change or metamorphosis in the form, nature, or appearance of
something” (Stern, 2016b, p. 5). Combining these terms, a **powerful transformative experience** in this study refers to one that is sufficiently potent to elicit a transformative shift in one’s sense of self, and as a result, one has been deeply and fundamentally altered. A powerful transformative experience (PTE) is synonymous with a transformative experience, and the two concepts are used interchangeably in this study.

PTEs are part of the natural human lifecycle, enabling “necessary change toward evolutionary shifts in human development and consciousness” (Stern, 2016b, p. 4). PTEs can take a variety of forms: they may appear suddenly as an epiphany, or more predictably as a disorienting dilemma when confronted with an unanticipated dissonance or change in life stage, or they may appear upon a period of reflection, as an enduring awakening. Regardless of the catalyst, PTEs are life changing, fundamentally altering a person’s thoughts, feelings, and essential sense of self in a profound way (Campbell, 1949/2008; Dirkx, 2006; Kegan, 1994; Maslow, 1971; Mezirow, 2000; Paul, 2015; Stern, 2016b; Taylor, 2001).

PTEs occur at the edge of one’s understanding—a liminal space where “we can come to terms with the limitations of our knowing and thus begin to stretch those limits” (Garvey-Berger, 2004, p. 338; Stern, 2016b). The evolutionary task of PTEs hinge on sense-making and meaning making from a newly expanded frame of reference, and they enable integration and an expansion of one’s identity. In this process, the self, which is both stable and malleable, engages in re-evaluation and re-construction through a combination of internal self-reflexive inquiry and external (social and other, for example environment or place) experiences (Arons & Richards, 2012; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Myers, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012, Stern, 2016b). Representations of the self may be understood through multiple ways of knowing; they may be...
cognitive and/or affective; they may be in verbal, image, neural, or sensorimotor form; they represent the self in the past and future as well as the here-and-now; and they are of the actual self and of the possible self (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 307)

Changes in the self that occur as a result of a PTE may manifest in different ways. Sometimes the changes may appear to stem from chaotic or nonlinear processes, and more commonly, the change is identifiably part of a cyclical pattern. Various perspectives and theoretical contributions on PTEs will next be reviewed.

**Perspectives of Transformative Experiences**

PTEs have been studied through many different lenses; in this review, I will touch on some of the general themes that pervade across the literature. Wisdom traditions and timeless ways of knowing will be discussed, then rites of passage, archetypal and mythical journeys, and the hero’s journey (Stern, 2016b). Contemporary literature on the relationship between PTEs, place, and sense of self will also be included. Thereafter, I will touch on several theoretical contributions to PTEs, including Transformative Learning, Adult Constructive Development, and Theory-U Process.

**Wisdom traditions and timeless ways of knowing.** Ancient and timeless ways of knowing are a source of wisdom relevant to PTEs. Through lifestyle choices and values of living harmoniously with the natural world and each other, various indigenous people have employed diverse ways of knowing beyond thinking, which are said to be enablers of PTEs (Wolff & Hartmann, 2001). Guided by intuitive awareness, indigenous people honor their relationship with the earth through their worldview that respects the interconnectedness of all of life. Living in a state of oneness with their environment, all living beings, and the places they have imbued with meaning, indigenous people participate in practices and rituals (as other ways of knowing) which facilitate the emergence of states akin to PTEs (Stern, 2016b). In a similar spirit, the contemporary phenomenological scholarship of Abram (1997), Adams (1996, 1997), Berry
(2002), and Macy (2003) “all suggest a call for a *primacy of interrelating*, harkening back to the wisdom of nature, in all its manifestations, as a source for transformative experience” (Stern, 2016b, p. 10).

One example of an indigenous wisdom tradition that enables PTEs is the practice of Shamanism. Shamanism involves particular knowledge and rituals thought to facilitate PTEs and altered states of consciousness (Eliade, 1964; Taussig, 1987; Wendling, 2005). Religious scholar Mircea Eliade described shamanism as “one of the archaic techniques of ecstasy—at once mysticism, magic, and ‘religion’ in the broadest sense of the term” (Eliade, 1964, p. xix). Shamanic practices often include initiation rites, artifacts, and trance-inducing techniques, all of which are designed to enable PTEs and mend the human soul (Stern, 2016b).

Shamans are thought to possess distinctive abilities to perceive and act as intermediaries between the spirit worlds and the human world. Entering into supernatural realms or other dimensional states, shamans are believed to facilitate PTEs in others, thereby treating psycho-spiritual, physical, and communal ailments or imbalances, while restoring balance to individuals and whole systems (Stern, 2016b; Wendling, 2005).

Modern shamanism, also referred to as neo-shamanism and the neo-shamanic movement, is informed by traditional shamanic practices. Today’s modern practices have been shaped by a confluence of belief systems and practices, including indigenous rituals, new-age counter-cultural movements, as well as assorted other eclectic, ethnographic, and philosophical perspectives. Whether through initiatory rituals, other processes, or the use of entheogens (which may induce psychological or physiological changes, thereby facilitating transcendence or altered states of consciousness), traditional and neo-shamanic practices represent human attempts at
creating initiatory rites in pursuit of PTEs. Shamanism is closely linked with initiations, rites of passage, rituals, and other transformative journey processes (Eliade, 1964; Wendling, 2005).

**Rites of passage framework.** Early scholarship in PTEs can be attributed to Dutch ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960), who was the first Western anthropologist to interpret tribal rituals as structured, initiatory life transitions, or what he termed *rites of passage*. Van Gennep focused on initiation practices of adolescents into adulthood, and he noted other ritualized ceremonies, such as birth, death, and marriage. Through his observations, he concluded that all initiation rituals were collectively similar. Van Gennep determined that rites of passage were comprised of three phases: separation, liminality, and aggregation (also called re-aggregation or incorporation; Bridges, 2001, 2004; Moore, 2001, Stern, 2016b; van Gennep, 1909/1960; Wendling, 2005).

The three phases generally followed a cyclical change process. In the first phase, the individual was separated from their familiar social setting to enable a break from their old identity. This first phase “thus began with an ending—a symbolic death ritual, cutting, or marking action that ritualized a letting go process” (Stern, 2016b, p. 12). In the second phase, a time marked by isolation, the individual found themselves in a neutral-zone, described as an in-between liminal state. This phase was designed as a bridge between the old way of being and the new. This second phase was characterized as a threshold state of betwixt and between, and was necessarily ambiguous and transitional in nature. Finally, with the successful completion of the intended change, the third phase of aggregation (re-aggregation or incorporation) was fulfilled. In this phase, individuals could assume their new identity and thereby be re-integrated into the social order or group from the basis of a new identity. The third and final phase of re-incorporation was often characterized by complex rituals or ceremonies, for example, an
elaborate marriage or graduation, and in some cases, artifacts such as a ring were included, which represented an outward symbol of change (Stern, 2016b; van Gennep, 1909/1960).

Van Gennep’s scholarship on initiation and rites of passage was noteworthy, and it thereafter was built upon by Turner (1969), Campbell (2004, 1949/2008), Moore (2001) and many others. The rites of passage framework demonstrated a universally representative process that is fundamental to the shaping of human development, socialization, and transformation. The phases in the rites of passage framework share a similar pattern to that of Campbell’s (1949/2008) “The Hero’s Journey,” which is the next subject to be discussed.

Archetypal and mythical journeys. In The Hero With a Thousand Faces, noted scholar Joseph Campbell (1949/2008) built on the work of van Gennep and Turner, relaying his findings about The Hero’s Journey and the process of transformation through his studies of archetypal and mythical journeys. Campbell popularized the term universal mono-myth to describe the hero’s journey, which is a narrative archetypal pattern found in world mythologies. In the hero’s journey, the archetype known as “the hero” undergoes an adventure to achieve great deeds on behalf of the community or group (Campbell, 1949/2008; Lundin-Taylor, 2014; Moore, 2001; Stern, 2016b).

The hero’s journey follows a process similar to van Gennep’s three phases. Beginning with a call, crisis, or separation of some kind, the journeyer is then propelled through what Campbell refers to as three meta-phases: separation (also called departure), initiation, and return (Campbell, 1949/2008). More elaborate that van Gennep’s three phases, the hero’s journey can contain up to 17 different phases, although most myths contain far fewer (Campbell, 1949/2008). A succinct overview of the basic stages (shown in italics) in the hero’s journey is as follows:

The hero is introduced to his ordinary world [emphasis added] where he receives the call to adventure [emphasis added]. He is reluctant [emphasis added] at first to cross the first
threshold where he eventually encounters tests, allies, and enemies. He reaches the innermost cave where he endures the supreme ordeal. He seizes the sword or the treasure and is pursued on the road back to his world. He is resurrected and transformed by his experience. He returns to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or elixir to benefit his world. ("The Hero’s Journey," n.d., para. 20)

The hero’s journey represents a PTE and universal pattern wherein the transformation of consciousness is enabled through a cyclical and evolutionary process. The hero’s internal change process mirrors other phases of human development, including the metaphors of death, awakening, opportunity, crisis, unfolding, rebirth, growth, remembering, evolution, transformation, and integration (Campbell, 1949/2008; Metzner, 1998; Plotkin, 2015; Stern, 2016b, Wendling, 2005). Campbell (2004) noted that a function of myths and archetypal journeys is “awakening in the individual a sense of awe and mystery and gratitude for the ultimate mystery of being” (p. 104). The hero’s journey and its counterpart, Murdock’s (1990) heroine’s journey, both describe epic quests throughout history that demonstrate re-integration, wholeness, and spiritual transformation within the human life cycle, supported by three vital passages: separation, initiation, and return.

**Contemporary approaches to transformation.** Building on historical scholarship and perspectives on change, some contemporary practitioners and theorists of PTEs have included ecological sensibilities and the awareness of place into their work. Environmental psychologist Bill Plotkin (2014, 2015) has concluded that PTEs can be enabled through immersive and initiatory journeys into the wilderness. Based on a developmental and experiential learning model called “The Soulcentric Development Wheel,” Plotkin’s nature-based approach to supporting “journeys of soul initiation” and immersions into the psyche are understood through a view of the world as an animate, mysterious, and evolving system that is self-organizing and whole.
Several other eco-psychologists and scholars have explored the intersection of PTEs, place, and sense of self. In his dissertation, *Earth Medicine: Transformation in Nature*, Jensen (2004) examined the narratives of 20 co-researchers on a vision quest which involved “multiple ways of knowing and result[ed] in whole person learning, epochal transformation, and embodied transformative learning” (p. v). Harper, Carpenter, and Segal (2013), in conjunction with Outward Bound Canada, studied the practice of *journeying* as an approach to facilitating personal growth through a reconnection with nature. Their findings suggest that “one’s sense of place relates closely to one’s sense of self—a self inextricably linked and emergent within one’s context” (p. 319).

Other scholars have linked PTE with place and sense of self. White (2011) researched a phenomenological self-inquiry into ecological consciousness and Windhorst (2016) gave a personal, auto-ethnographic, narrative account of PTEs in nature at different life stages. In addition, Leff (2013), Nolan (2015), and Rosenthal (2011), investigated the experience of place-based education programs, with Rosenthal also examining personal transformation and place identity.

PTEs have also been found as a research subject or as the results of many other studies. Several of these bear noting because of the variety of different contexts within which they appear. This partial list includes the relationship between PTEs and the landscape (Brooks, 2007; Haggarty, 2005; Havik, Elands, & van Koppen, 2015; Hintz, 2015; Maier, 2011; Olstad, 2012; Oxford, 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2013), PTEs and travel (Coughlin & Gooch, 2011; Gambrell, 2015; Hintlian, 2011; Lean, Staiff, & Waterton, 2014; Li, 2000; McNeil, 2004; A. D. Morgan, 2010), PTEs and vernacular arts (Rex, 2016; Spring, 2014), and PTEs and pilgrimage (Chew, 2006; Compton, 2007; Gossen, 2012), among many others.
Religious, spiritual, and wisdom traditions were also strongly linked with PTEs (and in some instances, with place). Schlitz, Vieten, and Amorok (2008) surveyed and interviewed a diverse pool of individuals from a wide variety of spiritual traditions in a decade-long research study on transformative experiences. From their findings, Schlitz et al. (2008) defined transformative experience as

a profound shift in your perspective resulting in long-lasting, life-enhancing changes in the way you experience and relate to yourself, others, and the world. Consciousness transformations may occur in ordinary and non-ordinary states of consciousness… transformative experiences can either be gradual, taking form in your consciousness over time, or they can be sudden, with triggers ranging from life crises to mystical experiences. (p. 31)

To further enrich their description, Schlitz et al. (2008) also used the word noetic. Their understanding of a PTE thus includes a subjective, inner, self-reflexive process of knowing.

Noetic experiences encompass what William James (2012) called mystical experiences, Jung (1975) described as encounters with the numinous, and Maslow (1964) referred to as peak experiences (Stern, 2016b).

**Transformative learning theory.** Initially developed by Mezirow (2000) as a response to how adult learners might develop greater degrees of agency and insight, Transformative Learning theory (TL) posits that a perspective transformation is a process by which a learner’s fundamental frames of reference are altered. The experience of TL is based on a model that includes 10-phases, which begins with a disorienting dilemma and ends with a re-integration of new habits of mind, perspectives, and meaning schemes (Mezirow, 2000). Not unlike the hero’s journey, the process of TL is cyclical and includes stages and phases. Mezirow’s (1990, 2003) 10-phase process can be described as follows:

Beginning with a disorienting dilemma, an experience akin to a nadir experience or Campbell’s “the call” in the hero’s journey, the disorienting dilemma sets in motion a process not unlike the universal monomyth in its transformative nature. The ten phases proceed as follows: A disorienting dilemma; self-examination with feelings of fear,
anger, shame, or guilt; a critical assessment of assumptions; recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformative are shared, and that others have negotiated a similar change; the exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan; trying out new roles; building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; a reintegration of new perspectives into one’s life (Stern, 2016b, p. 16).

Whereas Mezirow focused primarily on the application of critical thinking and rational learning processes to change in TL, other TL scholars have stressed the emotional and holistic factors that contribute to TL and to PTEs (Boyd, 1991; Dirkx, 1997, 2006, 2012; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 2001). In his research, Taylor (1997, 2001) concluded, “emotions are indispensable for rationality, such that one cannot reason without emotions or feelings” (Taylor, 2001, p. 219). Taylor also emphasized the value of other ways of knowing, multiple intelligences, and emotional literacy in enabling TL. Boyd (1991) applied a depth psychology perspective to TL, and Dirkx (1997) proposed nurturing soulwork as a catalyst for PTEs and TL. Dirkx (2012) recognized the value of including the unconscious, imagination, spirituality, and creativity in the further explorations of TL. Dirkx (1997) also noted similarities between TL and other cyclical and archetypal change processes of human transformation, such as the rites of passage framework and other variations and evolutions on this theme (Stern, 2016b). Dirkx (1997) clarified that PTEs represent “a heroic struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from the forces of unconsciousness and ignorance” (p. 79).

Before moving on to the next theory of transformation, a final quote from TL scholar Dean Elias serves as segue between TL and the next topic, that of adult constructive development:

Transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of world views and the specific capacities of the self: transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconsciousness and critically analyzing underlying premises. (Elias as cited in Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 125)
**Adult-constructive development theory.** Adult constructive development theory is a psychological theory and way of examining, describing, and assessing human growth and change over the lifespan (Berger, 2002; Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2013; Garvey-Berger, 2011; Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Kegan, 1980, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Rooke & Torbert, 2005; Torbert et al., 2004). It is both constructive and developmental because it concerns how an individual constructs reality and how the construction develops with greater complexity over time (Berger, 2002; Kegan, 1994). Earlier models of adult constructive development were based on five stages or “orders of mind” through which development generally occurs.

Building on the work of Baldwin (1906), Piaget (1954, 1970), Kohlberg (1969, 1981), Loevinger (1979), and Erikson (1982), among others, Robert Kegan “distinguished between assimilative processes, in which new experience is shaped to conform to existing knowledge structures, and accommodative processes, in which the structures themselves change in response to new experience” (Kegan as cited in Mezirow, 2000, p. 47). Kegan clarified that transformation is accommodative, because it is the structure and form of the meaning-system that changes through transformation. Thus, it is form within the trans-form-ation that gains an increased capacity. The newly adopted meaning system is able to accommodate greater complexity, more demands, and increased levels of ambiguity. This process requires the ability to be self-reflexive. In Kegan’s language, a PTE would be accommodative, because when someone transforms, the change is, “not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows—not just what he knows but the way he knows” (Kegan, 1994, p. 17).

Transformation of meaning schemes typically occurs when, as with a disorienting dilemma, an individual is faced with an inability to make sense of something from their current meaning scheme. Previous habits of mind no longer work, causing the individual to question and
see their previous assumptions and beliefs from a newly expanded perspective. Thus it is how the individual both attends to their meaning-forming and thereafter, how they then re-form their meaning forming that enables transformation and an increase in capacity (Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2013; Garvey-Berger, 2011; Joiner & Josephs, 2007; Kegan, 1980, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Rooke & Torbert, 2005; Torbert et al., 2004).

Kegan (1994) described a sense-making challenge as one that requires distinguishing between that which is subject and that which is object. Kegan (1994) clarified, “Subject refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in” (p. 32); Object refers to that which we “can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for…[and] take control of” (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). Essentially, “we have object; we are subject” (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). Constructive developmental theory suggests that transformation occurs through the process of what was subject in our knowing becoming object. The shift changes the form of one’s knowing, allowing for a more expansive way of navigating and making sense of the world.

As adult constructive development theory has evolved, different theorists have brought varying perspectives to framing, naming, describing, and categorizing their approaches. As was the case with transformative learning theorists, some scholars stress the cognitive aspects of transformation, whereas others focus more on ego-development and more specifically the development of the whole person, including intuitive, affective, behavioral, and spiritual factors (Anderson & Adams, 2016; Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2013; Kegan, 1980, 1994; Rooke & Torbert, 2005; Stern, 2016b). All do concur, however, “transformation occurs at different levels or orders of consciousness, each possessing different developmental challenges” (Stern, 2016b, p. 20). Each order of consciousness includes and transcends the previous one, so as an individual moves...

**Theory-U.** Theory U (also called the *U-Process*; Scharmer, 2009; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013) is a contemporary transformational process that approaches change from a slightly different lens than those mentioned thus far. Scharmer (2009) described Theory U as a “social technology of transformational change” (p. 5). Theory U follows a cyclical U-shaped process based on the concept of *Presencing*, which means “sensing and actualizing one’s highest future potential—acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19)\(^1\). Theory U applies sensing, listening, and awareness-based practices in order to “get to the deep point of transformation” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 21), which is the place of presencing. The U-process unfolds as follows:

> It is necessary first to go down the U (the left-hand side) by opening our hearts, minds and wills, and then, after passing through the “eye of the needle” at the bottom, go up the U (the right-hand side) to bring the new into reality (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 21)

By attending to (listening to, observing, and sensing) one’s attention and noticing the source from which one operates, one is able to slow down and learn—from both past experiences and the future, as it emerges (Scharmer, 2009). The emphasis is on the experiential process of presencing, which enables one to access the *social field*, and thereby sense into the possibilities of the emergent future.

It is often at the bottom of the U where one encounters access to PTEs in the form of other kinds of knowing, more specifically *primary knowing*; presencing is a kind of primary

\(^1\) The word presencing is a portmanteau of the words presence—the state of being in the present moment, and sensing—feeling the future possibility.
knowing. Distinct from analytical knowing, Rosch described primary knowing as arising from “interconnected wholes, rather than isolated contingent parts and by means of time-less, direct, presentation rather than through stored re-presentation” (Rosch as cited in Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004, pp. 98-99). Rosch (as cited in Senge et al., 2004) also described primary knowing as “timeless, direct, spontaneous, open, unconditional value, and compassionate…based on wholes larger than the self” (p. 99). Gunnlaugson (2015) refers to this as “primary being” (para. 3).

The presencing process allows one to re-connect with one’s essential self so as to invite newly emergent insights toward action. As Scharmer (2009) noted,

Presencing happens when our perception begins to connect to the source of our emerging future. The boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one’s authentic Self. When this co-presence, or merging of the three types of presence, begins to resonate, we experience a profound shift, a change of the place from which we operate. (p. 165)

Theory U and presencing is thus a kind of PTE, a type of “somatic mindfulness practice coupled with generative dialogue…designed to engage the body, intuition, and whole being as sources of individual and collective insight” (Stern, 2015, para. 2). Scharmer (2009) also noted the importance of place in facilitating PTEs: “How to use and leverage the presence and power of certain places for accessing the authentic dimension of self in individuals and communities is one of the most interesting research questions for the years to come” (p. 188). Theory U is one contemporary process that enables PTEs at the personal, organizational, and societal levels.

Types and Dimensions of Transformative Experiences

Types of PTEs vary and descriptions can be found in a wide array of sources. PTEs have been the purview of scholars from fields such as religion, philosophy, psychology, phenomenology, spirituality, education, wisdom traditions, literature, mythology, the arts, the
sciences, cultural domains, personal narratives, aesthetic encounters, and in natural environments, among others (Stern, 2016b). General examples of descriptions of PTEs include a defining moment, mind-expanding, life-changing, turning point, watershed moment, wake-up call, awakening, and worldview shift. More in-depth descriptions vary considerably, depending on the type of experience and how it is interpreted. Five broadly defined types of PTEs will next be discussed.

A review of the literature on PTEs suggests there are five types that can be categorized as peak, plateau, and nadir experiences, epiphanies, and liminal states (Stern, 2016b). These experiences can be identified and conceptualized along several continuums. For example, one continuum is temporal, based on the length or number of phases the process of transformation entails, or how fleeting or enduring the experience or change is. Another way of categorizing a PTE is by its intensity, whether it is easily perceptible, profound, or subtle. A third way of categorizing a PTE is on a spectrum organizing the experience anywhere from an abysmal nadir to an awe-inducing peak experience. In this conceptualization, a whole host of feelings may accompany the experience. On the nadir end, feelings of sorrow, regret, anxiety, fear, or anger may be present. On the peak and plateau side of the continuum (or cycle) are feelings such as well-being, serenity, joy, trust, transcendence, and love (Plutchik, 2000). In between, are epiphanies, which can be experienced as nadir or peak, and the liminal zone, where feelings of confusion, emptiness, bewilderment, impatience, struggle, and surrender prevail.

PTEs can also be understood through different ways of knowing or with an orientation toward cognitive, affective, or holistic sense-making (Mezirow, 2000; Pugh, 2011). All of these experiences are a natural part of the process of transformation. Adding to this complexity are other imperceptible factors that influence meaning-making, such as the unconscious, myths, and
universal archetypes, all of which contribute to interpretation and sense-making (Campbell, 2004; Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; Jung, 1981)

**Nadir experiences.** One place to begin a more nuanced clarification of the five types of PTEs is with nadir experiences (NE). As previously noted, PTEs are often catalyzed by a challenging circumstance or disorienting dilemma, an example being the hero’s journey and transformative learning. Originally introduced into the literature by Thorne (1963), NE were first explored as a counterpart to the study of peak and plateau experiences, and are sometimes described as awakenings (Stagg, 2014), crucibles (Thomas, 2009), or traumatic events (Jaffe, 1985; Stagg, 2014). NE are generally precipitated by *nadir events*, which are very low points in life that can lead to feelings of disillusionment, inner turmoil, aloneness, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, vulnerability, and despair (Jaffe, 1985; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Kumar, 2005; McDonald, 2008; Stagg, 2014, Stern, 2016b). Described as dark night of the soul or an edge of darkness, “A sense of disintegration, powerlessness, and emptiness marks its immediate aftermath” (Stagg, 2014, p. 72).

NE unfold in a similar cyclical process to other stage and phase change sequences. Beginning with an initial event, they then proceed with a severance stage, a threshold stage, and finally, a reincorporation stage (Stagg, 2014). In this process, core beliefs about one’s sense of self, one’s identity, one’s meaning-making schemes, and one’s place in the world are questioned and re-evaluated. The struggle and pain of NE is “necessary to growth and the development of a certain level of self-awareness and wisdom” (Jaffe, 1985, p. 102). Whereas NE initially provoke negative emotions, post-traumatic growth and personal transformation are nonetheless frequently positive outcomes (Jaffe, 1985; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). When viewed from the lens of adult constructive development or a cyclical lens of awakening and self-renewal, NE serve as catalysts
for change, wherein “one is transformed at a basic structural level. The personality expands to accommodate new experience, and new levels of capacity and awareness develop” (Jaffe, 1985, p. 101).

**Liminality.** Whereas nadir experiences typically launch the start of a change process, another phase of a PTE is that of liminality, which can be understood as a period of in-between states, or a phase of transition. The term liminality is derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning a threshold, gateway, or boundary through which a change can occur, whether with people, places, or things (Elliot, 2015; Stern, 2016b, Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909/1960).

Building on nadir experiences as a starting point, Bridges (2004) described five aspects of the natural ending process (not in a particular order) that lead to liminality: “disengagement, dismantling, dis-identification, disenchantment, and disorientation” (p. 109). These are experiences of ending and dying, which, as Eliade (as cited in Bridges, 2004) noted, “lead way to another mode of being, a trial indispensable of regeneration; that is, to the beginning of a new life” (p. 132). The progression through the threshold stage is not necessarily orderly (Stagg, 2014), and it requires that a person look both backward and forward, as they simultaneously bridge letting go of the old and moving toward the new (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). “The threshold stage can be likened to a journey without a map through a no-man’s land, one with constantly changing terrain amidst many losses—that of direction, familiar markers, or known paths” (Stern, 2016b, p. 30).

The concept and experience of liminality can be understood as a time of significant transformation (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909/1960); as Bridges (2004) noted, “it is in the neutral zone that the real work of transformation takes place” (p. 154). Liminality can refer to varying states of consciousness, for example, the fuzzy in-between period of being semi-awake...
and asleep, or having a visceral sense, but not entirely conscious awareness of something. Liminality can be experienced as momentary or suspended (threshold moments), finite or bounded (e.g., a student exchange program, or the period of adolescence), or as longer periods, such as epochs (for example, extended periods of war, or the course of a lifespan). Liminality can refer to an in-between state of identity or societal standing. For example, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, or expatriates find themselves in a state of betwixt and between. Finally, the term liminality can be applied more literally to a physical space or spatial territory, such as the threshold of a door between two spaces, at a crossroad or juncture, at borders or bridges, or in disputed territories (Turner, 1969).

Turner (1969) distinguished between two different types of liminality: liminal space and liminoid space. Liminal space was characterized by a bounded container that provided just enough structure, permeability, and tension to “keep the vessel hot…for transformation to occur” (Moore, 2001, p. 49.) Liminal space was always stewarded by an elder or competent ritual leader. Liminal states that were both contained and stewarded by elders existed within a sacred space, which offered the possibility of regeneration and renewal through the ritual process of death and rebirth (Moore, 2001; Stern, 2016b; Turner, 1969). Individuals in the liminal state, referred to as threshold people, were characterized as betwixt and between and stripped of their identities, rank, and past (Turner, 1969).

By contrast, liminoid space was defined as a kind of space that did not involve a bounded structure, the support of a ritual elder, or the necessity to resolve a personal crisis, and thus, it did not necessarily enable transformation. Liminoid space lacked boundaries; it was considered a kind of no-man’s land, occupied by seekers, pilgrims, and individuals who, without the necessary initiatory conditions and support, could not reliably be stewarded through
transformation. Turner’s distinction between liminal and liminoid states is important. Although not all scholars completely agree what the exact conditions are that enable PTEs, there is some consensus that, as Moore (2001) noted, “the true locus of personal transformation is in a contained and secure liminality, but it tends to be so fragmented in the modern world that we experience liminoid space more often than liminal” (pp. 33-34). Winnicott (2002) similarly pointed to the necessity of what he referred to as a holding environment, within which the self can securely risk development and transformation.

**Peak experiences.** Toward the other end of the spectrum from nadir experiences and liminality are Peak Experiences (PE), a type of PTE which Maslow (1971) described as “the most joyous, happiest, most blissful moments” (p. 175), marked by a sense of wholeness, timelessness, personal illumination, and self-transcendence (Maslow, 1962, 1964). Drawing on historical reports of experiences that were associated with supernatural revelation and/or religious conversion, Maslow researched exceptional experiences of healthy people, which was unusual at that time because most psychological research was focused on disorders.

Maslow (1962, 1964, 1971) reframed peak and plateau experiences through the lens of existential and humanistic psychology, claiming peak experiences were naturally occurring human phenomena (Maslow, 1964). As an aspect of his well-known theory of a hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1964, 1968) connected peak experiences with the human drive toward self-actualization. Other scholars have used the following terms to describe peak experiences (PE):

- transcendent (James, 2012; Levin & Steele, 2005; Maslow, 1964),
- mystical (Maslow, 1964, 1971; Wulff, 1996),
- ecstatic (Levin & Steele, 2005; Maslow, 1964),
- flow-state inducing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990),
- sacred (Eliade, 1987; Moore, 2001),
- magical (Lichtenstein, 1997; Maslow, 1964),
- grace (Lichtenstein, 1997),
- numinous (James, 2012),
- illuminating (Underhill, 2002),
- source (Jaworski, 2012),
- epiphanic (Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2008),
- presence (Senge, Scharmer, Flowers, & Jaworski, 2004),
- synchronicity (Jaworski, 2012),
- awe inspiring (Fredrickson, 2009; Keltner & Haidt, 2003),
- coherent (Bohm, 1996),
- holistic (Dewey, 1980; Dirkgx, 2006; Maslow, 1964; Pugh,
The terms *transcendent ecstasy* and *peak experiences* were used interchangeably by Maslow in his writings (1964, 1968, 1971). Maslow (1962) also saw “peak-experiences as acute identity-experiences” (p. 97), indicating that “people in peak-experiences are most their identities, closest to their real selves” (p. 97).

Peak experiences tend to illicit two kinds of physical reactions, sometimes simultaneously: One is excitement, enthusiasm, and a high tension (“I feel wild, like jumping up and down, like yelling out loud” [Maslow, 1962, p. 108]), and the other is feeling a sense of relaxation, peace, and stillness. Other terms that have been used to describe a peak experience include: a sense of calm sureness, whole-hearted rightness, free-flowing outward, unselfconscious, instinctive, and creative (Maslow, 1962). In a PE, one feels at one’s best while using one’s highest potential. Inner conflicts, fears, and doubts disappear. Mindfulness of the present moment is accompanied by a loss of judgment about time and space. There is a perception that common concerns, dichotomies, and inhibitors are able to be transcended, toward greater integration and well-being in and of the world (Maslow, 1962, 1964). Maslow considered PE to be vital expressions on the path toward self-actualization, despite their sudden, unexpected, and transient qualities.

Although PEs are powerful, emotional encounters, Maslow also noted their limitations. Insofar as they can be unpredictable, Maslow determined that PEs could not reliably be counted on as a consistent means toward self-actualization. PEs do offer periodic glimpses into transcendent states of consciousness and one’s most authentic and highest self, but the excitement of PEs is to some degree at odds with more sustained transcendent states, such as those that can be cultivated more consistently. Maslow observed that states of serenity—what he
called *plateau experiences*—offer a more reliable and enduring path toward the process of spiritual self-development (Krippner, 1972; Maslow, 1971; Stern, 2016b).

**Plateau experiences.** Beyond peak experiences lie plateau experiences. Although Maslow did not provide a specific definition for the plateau experience, a description did appear in the glossary of a biography of Maslow by Hoffman (1988):

> [It is] a serene and calm, rather than intensely emotional, response to what we experience as miraculous or awesome. The high plateau always has a noetic and cognitive element, unlike the peak experience, which can be merely emotional; it is also far more volitional than the peak experience; for example, a mother who sits quietly gazing at her baby playing on the floor beside her. (p. 340)

Although less climactic and emotional than peak experiences, plateau experiences are more enduring and essentially cognitive. The plateau experience “represent[s] a witnessing of the world…a witnessing of reality. It involves seeing the symbolic, or the mythic, the poetic, the transcendent, the miraculous, the unbelievable…all of which are part of the real world” (Maslow as cited in Krippner, 1972, p. 115). The result is “a kind of unitive consciousness…the simultaneous perception of the sacred and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the rather constant or easy-without-effort sort of thing” (Maslow as cited in Krippner, 1972, p. 113).

Another important distinction about plateau experiences is that they can be voluntarily fostered, and their cultivation can be taught. Maslow suggested that a visit to a meadow or an art museum could induce the kind of consciousness present in a plateau experience. The cultivation of plateau states could enable the “teaching [of] serenity and calmness and peacefulness” (Krippner, 1972, p. 114), and also make it possible to “hold classes in miraculousness” (Krippner, 1972, p. 114). Maslow’s investigations into plateau experiences, and his later research
into transpersonal dimensions, supported his ongoing explorations in PTEs, self-actualization, and *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Maslow, 1971; Stern, 2016b).

**Epiphanies.** Epiphanies, another form of a PTE, share characteristics with and thus resemble peak, plateau, and nadir experiences. An epiphany is a sudden insight or realization that results in an enduring personal transformation (Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2008; Miller & C’de Baca, 2001). Jarvis (1997) conceptualized the epiphanic experience as “one of sudden discontinuous change, leading to profound, positive, and enduring transformation through reconfiguration of an individual’s most deeply held beliefs about self and world” (abstract). Miller and C’de Baca (2001) characterized epiphanies in a similar way, adding the term *quantum change*, which they defined as “a vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring transformation” (p. 4). McDonald (2008) identified six core characteristics of epiphanies, described as: (a) an antecedent state, (b) suddenness, (c) personal transformation, (d) illumination/insight, (e) meaning-making, and (f) enduring nature; these phases share aspects with other cyclical change processes previously mentioned. Epiphanies can also be understood as random, unpredictable, adaptive changes to a system, as well as cyclic processes of change (Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2008).

**Summary**

PTEs can present as a watershed moment, a wake-up call, or as a longer, cyclical process of multiple phases. The experience often begins with a metaphorical death or disorienting dilemma and then unfolds with a crossing of thresholds into unknown or unexpected realms. In the liminal zone, the individual undergoes a radical shift in form or identity. A re-assessment and re-framing thereafter catalyzes an expansion of consciousness such that a more robust capacity for greater complexity is enabled. The cycle of change completes with the individual returning to
the start of their journey, with new knowledge and wisdom to share. This process may be understood through multiple ways of knowing, including sensory, cognitive, affective, intuitive, embodied, holistic, or spiritual.

This concludes the last section of the literature review, which explored a variety of perspectives and dimensions on powerful transformative experiences (PTEs). A general overview of the literature was conducted on wisdom traditions and timeless ways of knowing, rites of passage, archetypal and mythical journeys, and the hero’s journey with respect to PTEs. Thereafter, theoretical contributions from Transformative Learning, Adult Constructive-Development, and Theory U-Process were presented. Essential dimensions of PTEs were discussed, including descriptions of nadir, peak, and plateau experiences, as well as epiphanies and liminal states. These insights about PTEs, particularly in the context of place, may well contribute to how one’s sense of self is formed, informed, or transformed, as well as how one sees the world and their place in it.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the primary research question, sub-questions, and rationale for the selection of phenomenology as the appropriate methodology, with a justification for a leaning toward an interpretative stance. I will then discuss the research design and how my role as the researcher and the topic of place influenced the methodological choice. The participant selection requirements will then be articulated, and ethical considerations will be reviewed. The chapter will conclude with the research interview guidelines, research procedures, data analysis, and potential research limitations.

Research Question

The primary research question posed in this study was: How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self?

With this question, my objective was to collect in-depth descriptions and accounts of participants’ experiences, delving into the sensory, visceral, emotional, cognitive, cultural, metaphysical, social, and relational aspects of their experiences. As participants elaborated on the details and subtleties of their recollections, sub-questions served to guide the second part of the question, which inquired into how those experiences may have shaped participants’ sense of self and identity.

The sub-questions were:

1. How do powerful experiences of place contribute to the formation of one’s sense of self?

2. How do powerful experiences of place inform the ongoing development of one’s sense of self?

3. How do powerful experiences of place transform one’s sense of self?
Choice and Rationale for Methodology

The goal of this study was to understand how participants’ sense of self might have been shaped by powerful experiences of place. An emphasis was placed on gathering rich, eidetic descriptions that have been particularly meaningful with respect to how they may have shaped participants’ identity. Questions probed into past lived experiences, whether related to early, formative places, slightly later (early to mid-life) experiences of place, or more recent (or even future potential places) that in some way held important meaning for participants.

In selecting a qualitative approach, Creswell (2013) suggested that four philosophical assumptions inform a researcher’s choice of qualitative research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. The selection of phenomenology as the methodology of choice has been influenced by these assumptions and my beliefs, as the primary researcher, about the nature of reality. My own interpretive framework leans towards social constructivism. In this frame, the ontological beliefs are that multiple realities are constructed through lived experiences and interactions with others. The epistemological beliefs of social constructivism are that reality is co-constructed and shaped by and between the researcher and the researched. The axiological beliefs are that individuals bring unique perspectives and values. The methodological beliefs lean toward an inductive and emergent approach to inquiry.

Because the primary focus of this study was on a person’s lived experience and meaning making process in all of its complexity, phenomenology was selected as the most appropriate qualitative method. Methodological variations within the field of phenomenology have been reviewed to determine the best choice among numerous options. Phenomenological variations range along a continuum from a more purely descriptive, reductionist, structured phenomenology, such as the work Amedeo Giorgi (2009) and the Duquesne School, to a more
interpretive stance, such as the work of Jonathan Smith (1996) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Phenomenology is both the study of experience and how we experience, “a rigorous science of experience” (Abram, 1996, p. 35), from a subjective or first-person point of view. Experience refers to not only passive experiences of sensory perception, but also emotion, intuition, imagination, and thought, as well as volition and action. Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, saw the need to return to the things themselves, “toward the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy” (Abram, 1996, p. 35). Phenomenological researchers collect data from individuals who have all experienced a particular phenomenon.

Consistent with the phenomenological approach, the questions being asked in this study emphasize the participants’ lived experiences, including the perceptions, descriptions, and ascribed meanings of those experiences (Creswell, 2013; Finlay, 2009b). By eliciting participants’ essential, powerful experiences as they specifically occurred in the context of place, phenomenology offers a way of uncovering knowledge through the immediate engagement with phenomena. The nature of the experience of place lends itself to a phenomenological method (Seamon, 2000a, 2000b).

Phenomenology is both a research methodology and “an umbrella term encompassing both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches” (Finlay, 2009b, p. 6). Phenomenological researchers generally agree on a primary concern for returning to embodied, experiential meanings, and that the experience of concretely lived phenomena can be captured through fresh, rich, and complex descriptions (Finlay, 2009b). However, a diversity of perspectives among phenomenologists has led to debate within the field about how to carry out
research in practice. At the root of these variations are (a) different fundamental assumptions, and (b) different methodological approaches as a response to those assumptions.

Numerous phenomenological orientations could be applied to studying powerful experiences of place, because each are, to a degree “responsive to both the phenomenon and the subjective interconnection between the research and the researched” (Finlay, 2009b, p. 7). The issues under consideration about which approach to take include the following concerns: (a) Should the aim be to produce a general (normative or nomothetic) description based on patterns, or is idiographic (individualistic or subjective) analysis of the phenomenon also a legitimate goal? (b) To what degree, potentially along a continuum, should interpretation be involved in the description? (c) How, and to what extent, should the researcher’s subjectivity be part of the foreground or background—what should the researcher’s attention be focused on? And, (d) should phenomenology be viewed as a science, an art, or both, and how tightly or loosely should it be defined? (Finlay, 2009b).

To address some of these issues and orient this study within the practice of phenomenological research, a brief history of phenomenology bears mentioning. Phenomenology is rooted in a response to, and break from, a positivistic orientation, which favors quantification, abstraction, and objectivity—a third-person perspective. Seeing experience as the source of all knowledge, Philosopher Edmund Husserl, deemed the father of phenomenology, brought forth the importance of the first-person perspective—an alternative, subjective point of view recognized as having value as a form of truth (Stern, 2016a). Three main types of phenomenology subsequently arose out of Husserl’s early work: (a) Realistic Phenomenology, also referred to as Transcendental Phenomenology, (b) Hermeneutic Phenomenology, and (c) Existential Phenomenology.
Transcendental Phenomenology was, according to Husserl, a descriptive way of identifying the essential structures of consciousness that underlay human experiences. Husserl saw phenomenology as an epistemology—a way of knowing, and his belief was that by rigorously analyzing and dissecting experiences into essences, a pure discovery of meanings and relationships would emerge. In this method, the researcher must bracket or suspend her biases to enable a fresh perception, thereby remaining (it is assumed) more objective in the analysis. Husserl’s essential style was thus referred to as “transcendental” phenomenology.

Eventually, other phenomenological thinkers expanded upon and then took issue with Husserl, disputing his transcendental orientation and taking his work in different directions. Among those scholars were Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who saw phenomenology not as an epistemology, but as an ontology—an essential way of being in the world. The distinction is that with Heidegger’s interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, descriptions are given by subjects, but then the researcher further inquires into the phenomena by trying to understand more deeply, through interpretation, the significance and meaning of the phenomena. The difference in fundamental assumptions and perspectives between what was understood as the experience of knowing and the experience of being ultimately led to a split in phenomenology. This resulted in Husserl’s phenomenology being called descriptive transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger’s being called interpretive, hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger’s work eventually then lead to what is now known as existential phenomenology (Stern, 2016a).

Following the interpretive and existential line of phenomenology, Heidegger argued in his 1927 book, Being and Time, “consciousness was not separate from the world and human existence” (as cited in Seamon, 2000a, p. 2). Rather, Heidegger called for “an existential
correction to Husserl that would interpret essential structures as basic categories of human experience rather than as pure, cerebral consciousness” (as cited in Seamon, 2000a, p. 3).

Heidegger’s orientation was a more holistic, embodied phenomenology, one that fully included what he called *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*. Existential phenomenology was later expanded by Merleau-Ponty, who further stressed the importance of the physicality of the body in the full human experience. Merleau-Ponty, in fact, urged the necessity of nondualistic phenomenology (Abram, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Seamon, 2000a), deciding, “not to privilege the standpoint of either existential or transcendental phenomenology” (Kopf, 2000, p. 134).

Following the interpretive and existential line of phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty, the selection of a nondual phenomenological approach for this study in particular made sense, because experiences of place cannot be divided into objective and subjective categories. Environmental phenomenologist David Seamon similarly argued that “person and world [are] intimately part and parcel” (Seamon, 2000a, p. 4), noting, “both exist always together and can only be correctly interpreted in terms of the holistic relationship, being-in-the-world” (Seamon, 2000a, p. 4). In addition, given the personal and subjective nature of this study, intuition, reading between the lines, and interpretation, by both the researcher and participants, were an important part of the implicit meaning-making process of this research.

Thus, along a continuum of descriptive versus interpretive phenomenology, as the primary researcher I leaned toward a nondual, interpretive stance for this study. Idiographic meanings of participants’ experiences were explicitly sought out, and they may or may not have offered a more generalized structure or essence of the experience of place and self. Because the data collected for the study was initially unknown, pre-determining an exact structure and process for data analysis was suboptimal. A flexible orientation regarding the degree of
interpretation for data explication was thus both reasonable and prudent. One flexible phenomenological approach that met these requirements was Finlay and Evans’s (2009) *Relational Approach* to phenomenological research.

According to Finlay (2009a) and Stern (2016b), and drawing on existential phenomenological philosophy (in particular the work of Merleau-Ponty), Finlay and Evans’s ideas have been influenced by philosopher Martin Buber (1971), relational analysis (such as Mitchell & Aron, 1999), Gestalt Theory (such as Hycner & Jacobs, 1995), inter-subjectivity theory (such as Stolorow & Atwood, 1992), and feminist methodologies (such as Fonow & Cook, 1991).

The Relational Approach views the descriptive (nomothetic) and interpretive (idiographic) orientations along a continuum, suggesting “no hard and fast boundaries between description and interpretation, as ‘such boundaries would be antithetical to the spirit of the phenomenological tradition that prizes individuality and creativity’” (Langdridge as cited in Finlay, 2009a, p. 11). The relational approach tends toward an interpretive frame, making it a good fit for both the research question and my epistemological orientation as a researcher.

The Relational Approach includes four interlinking dimensions:

1. Open presence,
2. Embodied inter-subjectivity,
3. Dialogic co-creation,
4. Entangled selves

...to show the importance of retaining an open, empathic embodied presence to another’s personhood while acknowledging the power of dialogue to bring to life new realities. Data is seen to emerge out of the researcher/co-researcher relationship and is mutually co-created in this encounter as each touches and impacts the other. What we can know and learn about another arises within the intersubjective space between. (Finlay, 2009a, p. 1)

Unlike other phenomenological methods that have a clear set of procedures, for example, Moustakas’s (1994) four primary processes, Finlay and Evan’s approach does not have predetermined steps. It qualifies as phenomenological research however, because “it involves (a) both rich description of the life-world or lived experience, and (b) the adoption by the researcher
of an open phenomenological attitude, wherein the researcher is able to set aside judgments about the phenomena” (Stern, 2016c, p. 30). More of an approach than a prescribed method, the four interlinking dimensions are designed to “fluidly permeate the research process as a whole” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 5).

**Research Design**

Finlay and Evans’s Relational Approach was thus selected as the methodological approach of choice for this dissertation, because each of the four dimensions of The Relational Approach infused the researcher and co-researchers’ (participants’) exchange with a discovery orientation, allowing the data to emerge “out of a co-created, embodied, dialogical encounter” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 4). The four dimensions served as a foundational self-priming and preparation by the researcher for all aspects of the research process, including participant selection, interactions, interviews, and data explication. This means I reviewed the four dimensions before and after each interview and throughout the research process so as to intentionally support and enable the kind of quality connections and exchanges I imagined for the interviews. The four interlinking dimensions, which will next be discussed, were (a) open presence, (b) embodied inter-subjectivity, (c) dialogic co-creation, and (d) entangled selves.

**Open Presence**

In the spirit of Carl Rogers’s (1951) “unconditional positive regard,” the dimension of open presence invited an empathic connection with the participant. This required having the ability to be fully present, while genuinely being curious and caring about their feelings. As a researcher and co-creator in the exchange, I was aware of my own thoughts, feelings, and sensations. My task was to notice mindfully any potential wandering that may have occurred within myself or in the exchange. Simultaneously, I maintained a stance of being curious about,
open to, and connected with the participant. Active listening, attentiveness, sensitivity, and vulnerability were all required. As well, having an ability to tolerate ambiguity, feeling comfort with the unknown, and possessing an awareness of emergent possibilities of what might unfold in the exchange were all key skills required of me as the primary researcher (Finlay, 2009a; Stern, 2016c). In so doing and being,

The researcher strives to leave his or her own world behind and to enter fully into the situation of the participants. The researcher empathically joins with participants (“co-performs” participants’ involvements) in their lived situation(s). This sharing of the experience is the basis for later reflection on meanings and experiential processes. This attitude involves an extreme form of self-care that savours the situations described in a slow meditative way, and attends to, even magnifies, all the details. This attitude is free of value judgments from an external frame of reference and instead focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the participant’s experience. (Wertz as cited in Finlay, 2009a, p. 5)

The dimension of open presence shares similarities with the dialogical principles of David Bohm (1996) in Bohmian Dialogue, William Isaacs’s (1999) dialogue processes, Parker Palmer’s (2004) Circle Process, and Moustakas’s (1994) Epoche process, wherein the researcher (or co-participant) seeks to put aside their biases, preconceived notions, and judgments. This is attempted in favor of “recognizing the profound and dynamic interaction which can occur between researcher and co-researcher” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 6).

**Embodied Inter-Subjectivity**

Related to open presence, the dimension of embodied inter-subjectivity is akin to feeling as if another person’s experience is your own. It calls for wholeheartedly putting one’s self into another person’s shoes (and body) so as to fully and inclusively understand their experience, while simultaneously not losing one’s own sense of self at the same time. This experience could be compared to Martin Buber’s (1971) understanding of the *I-Thou*, wherein we acknowledge that we are all part of a larger, inseparable whole (Finlay, 2009a). Heidegger’s term *being with*
also comes to mind, as does Seamon’s term of synergistic relationality, which Seamon (2015) similarly and of relevance, used to describe embodied, phenomenological experiences of place.

For both the researcher and co-researcher, the “embodied intersubjective intertwining and inclusion in practice” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 7) comes with the realization that the other person is both separate, while also being connected. Phenomenologist and eco-psychologist Will Adams (1996, 1997, 2005) referred to this as “the primacy of interrelating” (Adams, 1997, p. 24), “an existential given, and that as inherently relational beings, human are not separate from each other or nature, in its many forms” (Stern, 2016a, p. 36). Rather, “we are our interrelating… it is our essence, our calling and our path” (Adams, 1997, p. 24).

**Dialogic Co-Creation**

The process of dialogic co-creation allowed for new information to emerge as it was mutually revealed (Stern, 2016c). Dialogic co-creation “celebrates dialogue, reciprocity, interaction, and participation” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 8). This dimension brought to the fore the recognition that in relationships, people consciously and unconsciously impact each other at many levels, reciprocally and mutually influencing each other in an ongoing exchange (Finlay, 2009a; Stern, 2016c). Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Finlay, 2009a) further clarified this idea,

> In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are intersected into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. (p. 9)

Isaacs (1999) similarly described dialogic co-creation as “a living experience of inquiry within and between people… the most important parts of any conversation are those that neither party could have imagined before starting” (p. 9).
Entangled Selves

The concept of entangled selves suggests a co-relational, intentional, mutual revealing of multiple selves, each in relation to the other and the outer world.

This means the researcher and participants, as co-researchers, each have an internal awareness of the many aspects within, including individual histories, conscious and unconscious aspects of selves, and an understanding of the complexity and entanglements that occur as a result of these relationships. (Stern, 2016c, p. 34)

As well, entangled-selves includes the simultaneous, multi-level, dynamic interplay of, among, and across multiples selves as they emerge in relationship “in the interplay between the subjectivity and inter-subjectivity” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 10). This speaks to the multiple of subjectivities that present themselves in any and all exchanges, such that

in any one encounter… the “here and now” contains something of the “there and then”, where the selves of one person elicit those of another… these are the kinds of ideas expressed (in various guises) in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), as well as in relational psychoanalysis, Gestalt theory, inter-subjectivity, social constructionism, and feminist theory. (Finlay, 2009a, p.11)

Essentially, all humans bring a host of internal and eternal selves into every relational encounter. These intrapersonal and interpersonal complexities were an invitation for the researcher and participant (as a co-researcher) to employ reflexivity toward increased insights, mutual understanding, and co-revealing.

Research Setting

All interviews were conducted over the telephone using Skype™, with a focus on the audio aspects of the communication. Interviews were recorded two ways: Either using a conference calling recording feature and/or an application called Voice Recorder. An application called Recordium was used as a backup to record calls on an iPad™.

The video feature of Skype was not used. The reason for this stems from 15 years of experience professionally coaching individuals, couples, and teams over the phone. During that
time, I have found that audio interviews and conversations offer fewer distractions for both me as the interviewer, as well as for the participant. Focusing specifically on the audio helped me listen deeply to what was said, and to what was not said. Whereas visual cues can offer other kinds of supporting data, such as body language and facial expressions, they can also distract from subtleties in the audio. Focused audio benefits included aural cues such as pauses, intonation, voice clarity and strength, deflection, pace, and modulation. I have also found that when speaking about and sharing personal matters, particularly when they may be sensitive in nature, communicating without a visual component many actually be preferred, as some people may feel a reduction in personal exposure and vulnerability. If addressed at the beginning of the exchange, an audio focus can also help reduce the power differential between researcher and participant, which was important for building trust and collecting the quality of data this study required.

**Participants**

Eight voluntary participants were interviewed for this study. As specified in the criteria for participation, selected individuals had multiple powerful experiences of place, to which they could speak with ease. Participants were between the ages of 52 and 84 years old and spoke English. I aimed to select a cross-section of individuals who came from a variety of different backgrounds with regard to culture, education, race, socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, and life experience. However, the nature of my questions and participant selection requirements necessitated a greater degree of personal development, education, and ability to articulate clearly their experiences, which to some extent, limited my selection pool. There were also some time constraints that factored into the selection process, and ultimately, the pool of selected individuals was perhaps less diverse than it might have been. Identifying factors about participants were changed to ensure anonymity.
Participant Selection Criteria

Participants met the following eight criteria for participation in this research: First, they spoke English. Second, they were between the ages of 52 and 85. Based on my experience in my practicum, I found that slightly older individuals appeared to be more self-reflective, which this study required. I thus leaned toward selecting participants who were slightly older (second half of life) to assure they had multiple experiences they could speak to, and that they had previously reflected upon. Third, they all had at least one powerful, personally transformative experience connected to a particular place. Fourth, they had an awareness of, and could speak to, how their own powerful experiences of place had shaped their sense of self and identity, including when possible, experiences that were formative (early life), informative (developmental or growth related, i.e., adolescent or mid-life), and transformative (personally significant and/or evolutionary). Fifth, they all expressed a genuine interest in discussing the study topic so as to assure sufficient curiosity, depth, and personal stake in the co-discovery process. Sixth, they were willing to partake in a lengthy interview. Seventh, I offered to send each person a link to the recording for the review or a copy of the transcript. I also sent a customized follow-up email to each participant that included follow-up information, contacts, links, or other relevant information and appreciation based on our conversation. Each participant indicated an interest in knowing more about the study’s findings and conclusions. In all cases, there were follow-up emails from the participants indicating the conversation had been helpful, enjoyable, and in some cases, even enlightening. Eighth, through the signed consent form, participants granted me the right to record the interview and publish the data in a dissertation.
Participant Selection Method

Purposive sampling was used in this study to ensure a broader range of perspectives on the subject of study. The participant selection included individuals with contradictory or divergent perspectives on the topic (Yin, 2011). A strong emphasis was made on selecting individuals for whom this topic was compelling, resonant, and meaningful. Participants were generally comfortable with their sense of self and identity and as the conversation unfolded, they were willing to reveal and discuss different aspects of themselves, their past, and even their future. Participants were mostly willing to be openly reflective, and potentially share sensitive information. Feelings of vulnerability or discomfort did come up, but together a safe space was created such that they were willing to be open and self-disclosing. My intention was to protect participants’ confidentiality, well-being, and safeguard their identity. Selected individuals confirmed their desire to participate through email with a signed and emailed informed consent form. Prior to making the final selection on each participant, I reflected on the four dimension of Finlay and Evans’s Relational Approach and used my own felt-sense intuition to assure I was selecting appropriate participants.

Ethical Considerations

This study met the requirements and approval of the current Saybrook Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Interview data, both electronic and hard copies, will be stored in a secure location for 7 years per IRB requirements. Having met those technical requirements, from an emotional and ethical standpoint, the key consideration for this study was for the participants to trust that I will protect their privacy and dignity. Participants have given me the gift of their disclosure, time, and consideration; it is my intention to protect their well-being and identity as part of the process of this study.
**Data Collection**

In addition to the audio recording, field notes were taken before and after the interviews and used to supplement the data from the recordings and transcriptions. Notes were taken during the interviews but only to the extent that doing so did not distract from the interaction. Field notes, which also included sketches and other visual markings, served as important reminders of my own thought processes regarding highlights or key points, and included both descriptions and my own perceptions and intuition (Yin, 2011). Additional data from some participants, where available, was sought out before and after the interviews, so as to encourage further insights about their experiences that were helpful for sense-making. These included previous writing, visual, auditory, or other relevant forms of expression pertaining to participants’ backgrounds and experiences. Any changes made by participants after the interviews, which occurred as follow-up email threads, were added to the full dataset and used in the findings and explication. Further, as the researcher, I engaged in an ongoing process of self-reflection and journaling, with a focused intention of infusing my process with Finlay and Evans’s (2009) four dimensions of the Relational Approach. These various forms of data collection served to create greater triangulation so as to generate a more robust representation for explication and meaning-making.

Regarding the number of participants recommended for a phenomenological study, Creswell (2013) suggested, at the recommendation of Polkinghorne (1989), that between five and 25 individuals be interviewed who have all experienced the phenomenon under study. I had suggested between six and eight participants for this study because Guest, Bunce, and Johnson’s (2006) study showed six might be sufficient to achieve saturation. I was open to increasing that number if need be, and ultimately I selected eight participants for this study. According to Mason (2010), one factor contributing to sample size is *saturation*, which is a tool used to ensure that
data collected be accurate and of sufficient quality to support the study. Among qualitative researchers however, there is dispute about the importance of saturation, some suggesting it is a matter of degree, counter-productive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and even inappropriate (Dey, 1999). As Mason (2010) noted,

> There is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample—as the study goes on more data does not necessarily lead to more information. This is because one occurrence of a piece of data, or a code, is all that is necessary to ensure that it becomes part of the analysis framework. Frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research, as one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic. This is because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalised hypothesis statements. (para. 1)

Additionally, because phenomenological research that tends toward an interpretive stance involves in-depth interviews which are labor intensive, large sample analysis can be both time consuming and impractical (Mason, 2010). In their research on this issue, Guest et al. (2006) concluded that “for studies with a high level of homogeneity…a sample of six interviews may [be] sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations” (p. 78). Since the success of the data collection lies with the researcher, who is the primary instrument for data collection (Creswell, 2013), I focused on facilitating high quality, in-depth interviews and collecting other relevant data from eight carefully selected participants for this study.

**Procedures**

The study involved four parts prior to and including the interviews, and 10 parts for the data explication. The first four parts included preparation background review; pre-screening interview; main, long interview; and potential follow-up interview. The 10 parts of the data explication will be discussed in turn.

1. Preparation: Once potential participants were selected, I sent out a first email (previously approved through Saybrook University’s IRB). I did preliminary groundwork for each potential participant to find out more about them, learning as much as possible about their backgrounds. If they had a website, writing, or other sources of information about their previous or current work, background, or experiences, I reviewed it so as to gain a better
sense of who they are. In some cases this took significant effort because most of the individuals selected were older and they had had extensive and diverse careers. Five of the participants were published authors, and I read books and/or research papers by all of them. This preliminary knowledge scouting also served to help build a strong rapport with those I ultimately selected, as they quickly learned I had made the effort to find out about them, and in some cases, participants facilitated my learning about them by sending me articles they had written prior to our conversation.

2. Pre-screening process and interview: Potentially suitable participants were sent a second email (as a response to their interest in participating) thanking them for their interest. As part of the screening and interview scheduling, I engaged in multiple back and forth email exchanges with all of the participants to assure the research was a good fit and participants met all necessary criteria, based on a checklist. In the email exchange, I attached the informed consent form, requesting they review it. Once it was determined that they were definitely interested in participating, I asked them to sign and email the informed consent form back to me promptly. The interview process then proceeded over the next approximately four weeks.

Two participants engaged in a 15 to 30-minute pre-screening interview. At that time, I explained the longer interview process, answered any further questions participants may have had, and organized the date and time of the longer interview, with provisions to accommodate participants’ schedules. Three of the interviews had to be rescheduled by participants.

3. Main interview: Phone interviews with each participant varied in duration, ranging from 90 minutes to 170 minutes. Notes were taken during the conversation (to the extent that they did not distract from the focus) and immediately after each interview. I used the relationally oriented interviewing approaches of qualitative interviewer Josselson (2013) as a guideline for co-creating a cooperative and resonant alliance with participants, with an aim toward encouraging connection while also balancing the need to gather useful material for scientific inquiry.

4. Follow-up communication: All of the participants followed up after the interview, either on their own and/or as a response to a follow-up email sent by me. With several participants an ongoing email thread resulted in further clarifying data that were included as part of the total data collection. Participants did not elect to partake in a follow-up phone conversation after they had been sent a link to their recording or a copy of their transcript. Four participants asked for neither. After the interview, the participant or I had further clarifying questions in five of eight cases, which occurred through email. These data were included in the explication process. All participants indicated a desire to stay in touch, and I made tentative plans with several of them to meet in person at a later time.

**Interview Guideline Questions**

The following questions were used specifically for my own preparation as guidelines before and during the interviews. I did not ask the exact questions and they were not an interview
script. Rather, the questions were used as a general framework to support my own analytical thinking about the interview process direction and guide the conversation toward answering the primary research question and supporting sub-questions. The structure of the guiding questions followed three parts, to correspond with participants’ development and understanding of how their powerful experiences of place contributed to their sense of self and how their self-concept may have been transformed, informed, and/or formed.

The terms form, inform, and transform were selected for this study because they each resonated with what I was trying to understand. All of them kept resurfacing as keywords amidst innumerable combinations and possibilities over the course of inquiry and discovery process. Initially, when I was working to clarify the primary research question and sub-questions for this study, I struggled to hone in and select one of the three words. Hesitant to let any of them go, I set them all aside to allow some time for them to percolate. I then proceeded to complete my final essay on the nature of transformative experiences, and it was during that writing process that I discovered that the three words actually belonged together. All three words shared the same root of form.

Together, the three words described the developmental process of change one might undergo, either across the life cycle, or over the course of a change journey. The initial formation of one’s sense of self is a result of early experiences, influences, and attachments (place attachment theory is particularly relevant to this stage). Thereafter, as one develops, one’s sense of self can be said to be informed through adapting and evolving to a myriad of circumstances (identity theories may be helpful for this phase). In a change cycle, one may also invariably be confronted with life-changing experiences that could be described as transformative. These experiences could elicit a disorienting dilemma, an epiphany, or an enduring awakening, but
through transformation, one’s essential self is radically altered in the process. Whether through
one’s early identity formation, or over the course of adaptations that inform the changing self, or
through radical transformative experiences, one’s sense of self is invariably shaped over time and
place. Thus, these three aspects and phases of change were all selected and included as part of
the developmental process, which this study linked to powerful experiences of place. The
questions used as guidelines were:

Part 1a: Transformation

Starting with personal transformation:

Please tell me about a personally transformative experience you had that occurred
in the context of a powerful place.

1. Please describe the situation and any feelings, sensations, memories, images,
thoughts, associations, even your stream of consciousness, in which the experience
occurred.

2. Was the experience fleeting or enduring? Please describe.

3. What does personal transformation mean to you, and how did you transform?

4. What changes occurred in you as a result of your experience? How and in what
way(s) did your sense of yourself change?

Part 1b: Transformation and Place

About the place and your experience of it in the context of your transformation:

1. What about the place itself made it powerful and/or transformative…what was its
affect on you?

2. How was place intimately connected with your experience?

3. What words, qualities, feelings, sensations, or memories would best describe your
experience of the place itself?

Part 2: Inform

On how your experience has informed your sense of self:
1. What was particularly memorable and/or meaningful about that place and experience?

2. What meanings do you now associate with the place and experience?

3. How does the experience fit within the context of your life and your understanding of yourself?

Part 3: Form

On how place has *formed* your sense of self:

1. Can you tell me about an earlier memory of place, and how it may have been formative to your sense of self?

2. What are you aware of about how that place, or other places, may have shaped your sense of self?

3. Have you been attached to any places, and if so, how has that influenced your sense of self?

4. Are there other powerful experiences of place that were formative for you?

Part 4: Final reflection (meta-view)

Reflecting on ongoing personal development/evolution:

1. How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self?

2. How do experiences of place inhibit or enhance personal development and change?

3. How might experiences of place be more consciously considered so as to intentionally foster personal development?

4. How might experiences of place foster wholeness, coherence, and flourishing within the whole of life?

**Relational Interviews**

Prior to the start of each main interview, I did four things: first, I reviewed the interview guideline questions. Second, I reviewed Finlay and Evans’s (2009) four dimensions of the Relational Approach so they were top of mind and heart. Third, I had the interview question, sub-questions, and guiding questions in front of me, easily accessible during the interviews so I could refer to them as needed. Fourth, at the start of each interview, I thanked participants for
their interest in the research topic and study and for their willingness to participate. I prefaced each interview by thanking participants for the informed consent and reassured them that if they had any questions or concerns at any time, I would be happy to discuss them. I also reminded them that at any time, they could choose to discontinue the conversation.

I then began each interview with what Josselson (2013) referred to as a little q question, which oriented the interviewee to the research topic to engage him or her in the subject. The goal was to set a starting point that was close to the interviewee’s experience, but to do so indirectly, with the intention of not coloring the interview in a direction that did not fit the interviewee’s experience. This was done by ushering them into the conversation in a focused way, but simultaneously setting them at ease so they they could pick up the conversation with their story (Josselson, 2013).

I then invited the participant to share their (own) story of an important experience of a place that left a lasting impression on them. I listened intently, paying close attention to the details shared and the direction taken, allowing the participant to lead the conversation to the particular points of importance and meaning. My focus from the beginning and throughout the interview was placed on “the interviewee’s felt experience and their personal story” (Josselson, 2013, p. 68). The interview was a conversation as opposed to a more formal interview; my stance was to “invite association and exploration rather than an ‘answer’” (Josselson, 2013, p. 63). When or if I need further clarification, I asked participants to “tell me more,” and when appropriate, I reflected back what I heard, in the interviewee’s own language, so they felt heard, seen, and understood.

As the interview proceeded, I gave the participant my full attention and interest through actively listening to their story. Each story was fascinating, and I invited elaboration and detailed
descriptions from an empathic and relational stance, with the goal of co-creating a resonant exchange. I did not ask a lot of questions, and those I did ask were either clarifying or more open-ended, and I extended them judiciously, so as to engender a non-judgmental and open climate of safety and a mutuality. Silence was honored as part of the conversational process; in instances of extended pauses, I gently and empathically inquired into what other thoughts or impressions might be arising within the participant, while still inviting them to lead the direction of the response. When deeper feelings or points arose in the conversation, my primary task was “what Bion (1962) calls ‘containment’—holding, absorbing, and staying present with feelings…stay[ing] with the feeling while the participant shepherds it into words [to] follow it wherever it goes” (Josselson, 2013, p. 84).

In concluding the interview, I thanked the participant for their openness, generosity, and willingness to share their personal experiences. I asked them if they had any further questions, and I inquired into how the interview experience was for them. I asked them what questions they might have for me as we ended our time together for the interview. I also thank them for their time and shared my appreciation for what may have touched me in the interview process. Depending on time constraints, in some cases the offer for a follow-up conversation was extended through email. I also offered to send participants either a link to the recording and/or a copy of the transcript for their review, which half of the participants requested.

**Data Explication**

The 10 parts of the data explication process proceeded in the following sequence, in which for each interview, I:

1. Assured the recording was accurately transcribed by a professional transcription service, such as REV.com or other.

2. Reviewed the four dimensions of the Relational Approach, allowing them to infuse my understanding and prime the data explication process.
3. Listened carefully to the recording to check it against the transcription, making corrections as needed.

4. Reviewed my own detailed notes to get an overall sense of the whole, comparing them with the transcriptions for further accuracy and triangulation.

5. Listened to the recording a second time as needed, for any nuances I may have initially missed, comparing my notes and making any relevant additions or changes.

6. Coded data and identified the central descriptions and meanings of participants’ experiences, including sorting them into categories and subcategories.

7. Validated the data. Over the course of each interview, I periodically repeated back to the participants what I heard them say about their experiences and reflections to confirm my understanding. With quotes, I checked for accuracy, making every effort to reflect back participants’ verbatim wording as much as possible, with the goal of seeking to mirror back the spirit of what I heard to assure I have understood. My intention was to stay true to their description and experience. Participants were given access to their recording through a dial in number, or were sent the mp3 file, and/or sent their transcript, depending on their preference. They were invited to review the transcripts, either on their own time, or together with me on a follow-up call, to make any changes so as to better validate the data. I had further clarifying questions for several participants, which I asked over email through an exchange. That data was included in the findings.

8. Reflexive processing of the data on my end, including paying particular attention to examining my conscious and unconscious experiences, so as acknowledge my own entangled selves as they arose in the explication process. Another refresher of the four dimensions of the Relational Approach occurred at this juncture. This served as a means of mindfully and critically monitoring the data explication process, while encouraging that I, as the researcher, did not fall prey to focusing on my own emotions or internal preoccupations at the expense of distorting participants’ experiences (Finlay, 2009a).

9. Created a synthesis of individual and shared experiences and meanings. Thereafter, I looked for possible links (where applicable) between participants’ experiences of place and their understanding of how those experiences may have shaped their sense of self.

10. Prepared a final summary of the findings, including any overarching themes and conclusions, with the ultimate goal of discovering any layered meanings, essences and ideas that may have “arisen within the intersubjective space between” (Finlay, 2009a, p. 1), as part of the relationship between myself and the participant.
Limitations and Research Issues

Two potential limitations to this study were its sample size and the duration of the interviews. With only eight participants, it was important to select diverse participants who met the selection criteria and spoke authentically about their experiences so as to provide relevant and robust data. The pre-screening process was designed to rule out participants who did not fully meet all the study’s selection criteria.

Another issue that did come up was related to participants’ comfort with personal disclosure. Although I carefully pre-screened for this issue, and I did my best to create a climate of safety, trust, and care, some individuals were less comfortable with self-disclosure than others. Sharing personal perceptions, reflections, or experiences can feel intimate, and thus it was important to respect this sensitivity by creating a hospitable environment that invited this kind of disclosure. Over the course of the interviews, I found that as trust was built, participants were more self-revealing, and their willingness to disclose their vulnerabilities or aspects of their past selves increased. Looking back on their experiences, the conversation invited and allowed them to see patterns across their lives. This was a very interesting outcome of their participation, and some of them spoke to this benefit.

Participants may have wondered what was appropriate or inappropriate to openly share, given that they did not really know me or how I might respond. They may have had unexpressed expectations about how the interview process would go, or possibly unspoken concerns about confidentiality or other issues, even though in our correspondence, preliminary conversation(s), and in their signed informed consent form I had clearly indicated confidentiality to minimize any perceived concerns or risks. I was candid about the research process, and I did make a strong effort to get to know each participant through a number of different means, including their
previous writing, artistic endeavors, videos, articles, or any way I could. I encouraged participants to partake only to the extent that they felt willing and comfortable to do so. As the primary researcher, I made a genuine effort to co-create an environment of warmth, curiosity, and inclusion. At the end of the interview, participants shared that they appreciated my interest in their stories, and several said that they were grateful for my having actively listened to them.

Memory recall could have posed limitations and biases for both myself, as the primary researcher, as well as for participants. Memory is both selective and subjective, and human beings are notorious for unreliable memory recall (Gilbert, 2006). Even with promptly written field notes, cognitive memory biases such as hindsight bias, choice supporting bias, and availability heuristic affect biases and decision-making choices (Kahneman, 2012).

Regarding personal biases and filters, as the primary researcher, I identify as a female, late baby-boomer urban Californian, currently living as a European expatriate, with personal preferences for communication styles. My cultural identity, learning and interviewing style preferences, and perceiving and framing orientations invariably affected the analysis and lens through which the entire research process was viewed, carried-out, and made sense of.

Eliminating bias or attempting to set aside or “bracket” my own biases, experiences, and understandings was not only impossible, it was not necessarily desirable. Rather, as Halling, Leifer, and Rowe (2006) and Finlay (2008) have noted, the researcher needs to bring a critical self-awareness to their own pre-existing beliefs, which then allows them to separate out what belongs to them and what belongs to the participants. By bringing my own embodied subjectivity to the foreground, the research process then allowed me, in light of new evidence, to examine and question my own “vested interests, predilections and assumptions, and to be conscious of how these might impact on the research process and findings” (Finlay, 2008, p. 17).
Whereas the orientation of researcher at the foreground was more aligned with others phenomenological researchers with a hermeneutic sensibility, and descriptive phenomenological scholars may see the researcher at the foreground as lacking a systematic process of scientific rigor, this issue of art versus science is one of ongoing dispute. Taking a more methodical, general, and critical approach, Giorgi (2009) might argue that without an adherence to a systematic process, the research runs the risk of a reduction in what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. While still respecting the perspectives of Giorgi, perhaps the inclusive and artistic approach of phenomenologist Max van Manen and the Utrecht School tradition can be brought to bear on this issue. In the spirit of poet Rainer Maria Rilke, van Manen (2007) clarified

> Not unlike the poet, the phenomenologist directs the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stir us, exercises a formative effect. (p. 11)

Given the “relative, inter-subjective, fluid nature of knowledge” (Finlay, 2009b, p. 15), and the “recognition that truth is a matter of perspective” (Finlay, 2009b, p. 15), the strength of this research rests on my ability as the researcher to “embrace ambiguity, paradox, descriptive nuance, and a more relational unfolding of meanings” (Finlay, 2009b, p. 15). Through a co-creation of the research between the participants and myself, the intertwining of subject/object and self-other naturally informed the data and results.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter provides a presentation and analysis of the data obtained and a review of the study’s main findings. This qualitative study sought to answer the following primary research question: How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self? This question was explored in two parts in the data explication process. First, individual participants’ essential descriptions and meanings of powerfully transformative experiences of place were sought out, organized into themes, and analyzed. Second, three supporting sub-questions served to elucidate the second part of the primary question, which focused on how those experiences may have shaped (formed), informed, or transformed participants’ sense of self. The three supporting questions were:

1. How do powerful experiences of place contribute to the formation of one’s sense of self?
2. How do powerful experiences of place inform the ongoing development of one’s sense of self?
3. How do powerful experiences of place transform one’s sense of self?

Finlay and Evans’s (2009) relational, phenomenological approach was used to guide this inquiry. The primary question posed lent itself to phenomenology, and the relational approach was selected because it allowed for a nondual, interpretive stance and a flexible orientation regarding the degree of structure for interpretation and data explication. To analyze the findings, the four interlinking dimensions of the relational approach were reviewed as part of the 10-step explication process. The four dimensions that infused the data analysis were: (a) Open presence, (b) embodied inter-subjectivity, (c) dialogic co-creation, and (d) entangled selves. Themes were extracted from participant interviews to develop a synthesis of meanings and essences of participants’ experiences.
To gather the data, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight carefully selected participants who had met the criteria for participation. Interviews lasted 90 to 170 minutes. Calls were recorded through a conference call recording feature, a phone app, and a third backup app on an iPad as an extra precaution against possible data loss. General interview questions had previously been sent to participants through email exchanges, but each conversation followed its own unfolding process, which allowed for questions to emerge naturally in the dialogue. Participants were offered access to their recordings and transcripts and were invited to review content and make desired changes. Email exchanges after each of the interviews added further clarifications where needed, as did my own notes that were taken during or after the conversations. All the supplemental data beyond the recordings were included in the explication process.

All of the participants were excited about the topic, being interviewed, and being part of a research process that related to a topic which resonated strongly with them. Five of the participants could be described as very passionate about the topic, excited about my research, and willing to support and encourage ongoing research in whatever form it takes. These five participants have all written about, researched, or explored the topic of their own accord. All of the participants in this study had fascinating experiences and stories to share. They were all curious, self-reflecting, generous, and gracious in their willingness to share their stories as well as move the inquiry further forward. It was a joy and privilege to interview them.

In the section that follows, a group demographic overview of participants is included, summarized in Table 1, followed by a rich descriptive background for each of the study participants’ experiences of place, and how those experiences have shaped their sense of self. Participants were given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Participants’ stories were each
mapped out in an individual comprehensive depiction, including key quotes that strongly represented and underscored their particular experiences. Individual descriptions of powerful experiences were then synthesized and organized into themes. I then made a comprehensive table (see Table A1, Appendix A) to organize all of the themes, the supporting codes, and frequency of use for all the participants’ experiences.

Thereafter, I reviewed each of the transcripts a second time, this time for how those experiences may have formed, informed, or transformed participants’ sense of self. Data on participants’ descriptions of changes to their sense of self were organized by type and dimension. Table B1 (in Appendix B) was created to compile the data for Part 2. The table is organized by types, dimensions, and number of experiences for each participant. I then reflected on how the data might offer insight into the primary research question, by examining participants’ relationship between their powerful experiences of place and their sense of self.
Table 1

*Participants’ Demographics by Life Stage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Identities (field, industry, passions)</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Home/Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carole</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Environmental Educator, Writer, Landscape Designer, Scholar-Researcher, Community Builder, Place-maker</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>CA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Artist, Activist, Cooperative Gallery Owner, Non-Profit Director, Executive and Team Systems Coach, Facilitator</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>NY, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Pianist/Composer, Writer, Speaker, Leadership educator, Community and Organizational Learning Facilitator, and soulful Place-maker</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Environmental Educator, Community Design Facilitator, Preservationist, Activist, Cross-cultural bridge-builder, Place-maker</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>NC, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>IT specialist, Political Activist, Organizational Scholar-Practitioner, Facilitator, Naturalist, Athlete, Climber</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>CA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Architect, Urban Planner, Living Systems Regenerative Design Consultant, Educator, Speaker, Author, Community Leader, Place-maker</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>MA, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Investor, International Development, Private Equity, Entrepreneur, Finance, Nature Conservation</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Human Development Educator, OD Consultant, Facilitator, Community Builder, Sacred Place-maker</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>CA, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Narrative Descriptions

Carole

Carole is an 83-year young former professor, now retired from a well-respected university. She has had a rewarding academic career as an environmental design and landscape educator, and for a significant part of her life, that role has played an important part of her identity. Carole continues to work (and play) within these same areas; however, her focus and identity have evolved from an interest in the psychological and social factors influencing environmental design to how landscapes can specifically be used to foster healing and well-being. Carole has had a strong connection with various geographies, gardens, and healing landscapes. All of these themes, among others, have been a consistent thread across her life, and they played an especially prominent role in her formative years.

As a young child during World War II in the United Kingdom, Carole and her family were evacuated from London to a landscaped, overgrown country estate. Carole described the place as “a kind of magical environment for children,” a place where “I grew up with free reign of wandering and playing with my friends over a vast area… children were allowed to wander all day and no one worried about where you were.” Carole further described the experience as transformative…not only…at that stage of my life, and that stage in history…but also this was a time of war, and so there was a tension…among the adults…and a certain amount of anxiety among children who didn’t quite understand what was happening, but knew it was something bad and that it could become something very dangerous if there was an invasion.

She continued,

that place, that landscape offered me a sense of security and solace from the anxiety and fears that were roaming around in the atmosphere among the adults. It was a place of escape, of adventure, of exploration…and it was also a place where I was first introduced to gardening and producing food to help the family when we were rationed; it was one way I could make a contribution as a small child to what was going on. That experience of gardening has rippled through my life as a form of therapy, a form of joy, of exercise, of connection with the earth; and it’s something I hope I will always be able to do, and
have always done, pretty much throughout my life. So, I’d say that was the first transformative place in my life.

Carole’s formative years at the garden estate thus left a kind of imprinting on her about the power and meaning of landscapes and gardens, and to her the landscape was a kind of loving being; it was her home, her teacher, and a form of substitute mother. This theme, which recurs across her lifespan, profoundly shaped Carole’s formative identity, and as further stories revealed, she in turn sought out similar kinds of places within which she also experienced a resonance and healing.

Another powerful experience of place that Carole shared was when she took a job in the Sheffield area of the United Kingdom, which she described as “a very very depressed city.” Her salvation was to be found nearby in the Peaks District, a National Park, which she described as “having many different geological formations…very different landscapes…little villages…the most spectacular scenery you could find, pretty much, of the whole of Britain.” She continued,

I hiked all over that area and it was the most wonderful, wonderful place. It just re-injected me with…connection to the land, connection to beauty in comparison with this really sad industrial ugliness of Sheffield…it sort of kept me alive.

This theme of nature as a refuge, an escape, a place of freedom and discovery, and a place of revitalization and aliveness continued to appear as variations of a theme in several other of Carole’s stories and powerful experiences of place.

After emigrating to the United States, Carole eventually settled in Berkeley, California; It was the 1960s and a place and “time of counter-culture, and revolution, and civil rights…[it was] all a revelation to me.” Berkeley was radically different from anything Carole had previously known in her life, especially coming from an apolitical family in Britain. It was both a place and “a time of great turbulence, and for me, great expansion of my mind, and excitement.” Berkeley in the 1960s was a place of transformation. Indeed, it shaped Carole in innumerable ways. From
the marriage to one of her students, to an unusual co-parenting arrangement, anti-Vietnam marches, and the development of a community of like-minded humanistic colleagues, Berkeley shaped Carole and her evolving sense of self over half a century.

While teaching at the university, Carole had the opportunity to take a sabbatical. She elected to pursue a dream to spend a year abroad with her children at Findhorn. Having earlier encountered a book called *The Findhorn Garden*, Carole was intuitively drawn to spend time at Findhorn in the gardens and be part of that spiritually oriented community in Scotland. She described her experience there as “one of the most transformative years and places of my life.” Joining a garden team of different nationalities, growing food together as part of a vegetarian community, Carole said, “I was ecstatic about my life” as part of “this community that emanates love. It’s just an extraordinary place of caring and loving and supporting each other and working for each other.” At Findhorn, Carole was reminded of her earlier experiences at the garden estate of growing food for her family during the war. Working half time in the garden with her hands in the soil, and half time using her design skills to help with the Findhorn community planning development and research, Carole was able to bring her full self to the community. As she noted, “I was able…at that place, to use…both sides of my brain…[and] that made me very happy.”

“Heartbroken” at having to leave Findhorn after one year, and required to return to her academic post to keep her university position, Carole returned to California emboldened to share her powerful experiences of place from Findhorn. Offering sacred dance classes in the courtyard setting at the university was one way she brought the embodied aspect of her Findhorn self with her. She also eventually wrote an academic piece about Findhorn, focusing on the physical and psychological boundaries of the community, and how people become members of a group, or
not. Carole’s time at Findhorn gave her the opportunity to experience a fully integrated sense of self; she still acknowledges that “extraordinary” place as having had a profound impact on her identity.

University budget cuts ultimately meant a golden handshake and retirement package for Carole and her community of colleagues, all of whom eventually took early retirement. This was a time of transition for Carole, her colleagues, and the university. Everyone who had been part of the 1960s mentality and values were replaced, leaving a void in the landscape and architecture departments, and a sense of loss and marginalization among the former faculty, despite a generous financial retirement package. Carole barely had time to realize she was retiring when she was diagnosed with cancer.

Responding to the question “What is the most healing place that you can imagine,” Carole learned the practice of healing imagery as connected to powerful experiences of place. Applying that technique in conjunction with more traditional allopathic cancer treatments, Carole found healing imagery to be “incredibly helpful” and felt “it was a very very significant component of all the healing I was doing.” As part of the technique, Carole used her imagination to recall particular places that had been sustaining and enlivening. In addition to Findhorn, three other places came to mind. The first was Zen Center in Marin County, California, where Carole had had a regular Sunday meditation practice, walk, and Sabbath ritual for 15 or 20 years. The second was the island of Iona, also in Scotland, where Carole had previously had a powerful experience of place related to a meditation experience on one of her later visits to Findhorn. The third was her own back garden at her house in Berkeley. All of these places shared an elemental connection to place and the earth as a source of aliveness, wholeness, healing, and the sacred.
As part of her healing process, Carole had been reading books by cancer survivors and she found it extraordinary that no one ever talked about the environment or place as it related to healing. Carole saw an opportunity to contribute to others, knowing how important place had been to her own recovery. Then serendipitously, while at a conference on the island of Iona in Scotland, Carole was offered “an amazing gift…to live alone on the island of Iona in a safe warm house.” Thus began another powerful experience of place, and Carole spent a year on Iona where she began writing a memoir about the healing power of place.

On Iona, Carole spent her time reflecting, reading, writing, exploring, wandering, dreaming, learning, and communing with “her special place.” There, place enabled a spiritual inner journey, one through which she was able to reconnect with her self, heal, and restore her inner balance and relationship with the world. Carol’s experience of, and relationship with, Iona regenerated her and brought her to life in a co-affecting, mutually enmeshed, sacred dance. For Carole, Iona has been, and continues to be, a source of love, attachment, solace, enchantment, joy, discovery, and re-birth.

A final noteworthy place that has held special significance for Carole is her back garden in her Berkeley house. Although still able to travel, she noted, “my world, in a way, is narrowing a bit as I grow older…and I want to go on doing this [gardening] forever.” A recent investment in her garden has taken the form of raised beds, bamboo railings, a trellis, and new concrete paths with embedded leaf impressions that provide access to a compost bin and a greenhouse. The finished project has given her “a new lease on life in terms of being able to go out there and nurture things and plant things and watch them grow and feel safe.” Carole’s garden has been and continues to be a place of refuge, nurturance, growth, experimentation, and becoming. “I
have a greenhouse and that’s another of my wonderful transformative spaces because I am back now to my childhood…and raising vegetables and learning how to grow things….”

Carole’s powerful experiences of place have indeed formed, informed, and transformed her sense of self through a variety of meaningful places across her lifespan. Going forward, Carole continues to develop and work on healing landscapes with people in an ongoing discovery process of creation and community evolution.

Diana

Diana is a 78-year-young executive coach, facilitator, activist, and artist whose professional roles and affiliations have also included careers as a speech pathologist and audiologist, a non-profit director, a gallery owner, and a radio host. Diana has also traveled extensively to explore many different cultures, and it was during her travels that two powerful experiences of place shaped her sense of self. Diana also shared a third powerful experience of place from her childhood that shaped her formative identity.

As a young child in World War II in the United States, Diana grew up in a Jewish family, but living in the suburbs away from her religious community, she instead attended a very strict Catholic School. Her days were spent with the Catholic nuns, and by night, she was with her Orthodox Jewish family. As a result, at that time in her early life, Diana was filled with confusion about religion and rituals. With war in full force in Europe, there was a perception of threat in the United States. On one particular occasion, sirens went off at the Catholic School, and all the students were rushed to the gym for safety and hiding. Diana recalled the nuns screaming and a sense of panic and havoc that filled the place. Diana described it thus:

The fear around this experience was palpable….It was really intense. I left the school and I ran home…I actually had a keen sense of how to get home…it was between a half mile and three quarters of a mile from school to home…The nuns realized I was missing. They called the police and my mother was hysterical….When I found myself at home I was
delighted…wow, I made it home all by myself. I expected to be congratulated. Instead, I was yelled at and punished….I thought I was safe, only to realize my mother didn’t trust me and therefore….I understood very clearly that that wasn’t going to be a place of trust for the rest of my life.

For Diana, this early childhood experience in the formative places of school and home left longstanding associations and had a profound impact on her. She said it set up a fear-response of victimhood in her, and later she discovered she was dyslexic. She continued, “I found safety…within…I found a place in my head where nobody could touch me…I could just go to that place….It’s a place that I create and it’s beautiful. It’s not a negative space at all.” Reflecting back on those earlier childhood experiences and her sense of self, Diana clarified that place, to her, was a metaphor for an internal spiritual process, and her journey has been to find peace within that first home and not see her experience as one of victimhood.

Another important powerful experience of place occurred for Diana on a trip to India when she was in her 40s. She said, “India came about from an inner drive that I had to acknowledge and gain my independence; it was my objective as a single woman.” Another impetus for the trip was to write an article on emerging art in India, which had been specifically requested of her by a museum curator in New York. Initially, starting the trip with a female friend, the two made the Gandhi Peace Foundation the central place or “hub” of their adventure. Early morning hour-long meditation practice was “a big wake-up call” and introduction to the culture of India.

As part of a camel safari in the desert on the silk route to Pakistan, her friend became gravely ill, then collapsed and went into a semi-coma. Many hours from the closest city, Diana was not sure where to find medical help or how to solve her dilemma. “Exhausted, terrified, and not knowing if my friend was going to live another minute,” Diana had to think quickly to find a safe, clean, place to stay and help her friend. If there was ever a chance to test herself, under
pressure, this was it. In a very narrow window of time, Diana located and avoided a filthy, awful clinic, found a religious Zoroastrian Community to help, and elicited their assistance in securing medical support and a lovely place with a hired staff for her friend to rest and recover.

As Diana described it, “It was a traumatic experience, but the freedom was my independence”—and for Diana that meant a greater sense of trust in herself. She clarified,

It built self-confidence, it built self-worth, it built self-esteem…from that very first formative experience in preschool, [where] I wasn’t seen, I wasn’t heard, and I wasn’t listened to…that’s why the India trip was so important to me…I didn’t have that sense of I am okay wherever I am in the world. I needed that experience, and that’s what India gave me.

Diana’s Indian adventures were filled with numerous other stories of transformative experiences, which took the form of serendipitous encounters, artistic provocations, cross-cultural surprises, chaos, learning, and music. All of them were inextricably linked with that unpredictable place called India.

A final account by Diana of a transformative experience of place occurred on a trip to Brazil with her son, when she was a middle-aged mom in her 50s, and he was 30. The two had spent limited quality time together over the previous 12-year period, and at her suggestion, the month-long trip was an opportunity for the two of them to re-define their relationship. Starting out with a week-long celebration of Mardi Gras in Salvador Bahia, the two found themselves thrust into a 24-hour parade of “nonstop for days…dancing on trucks and constant music blasting and a frenzy…you could almost touch the dancers…you learned to sleep with that chaos going, learning how to tune it out and function.” The Mardi-Gras idea had been her son’s, and a week of that kind of intensity and “raw emotions” turned out to be a “great opening for our month together.” Reluctant to cut short that experience, Diana nonetheless suggested they move on to get out of the city and into nature, which by then it turned out her son was grateful to partake in.
The next leg of their adventure took them down the Amazon on a private riverboat with a guide to explore the rainforest for a week. Diana described her first recollections of that place as filled with sounds of drilling and saws—an indication of deforestation and devastation, which now more than twenty years later, continues to enrage her. The time in the rainforest with her son was filled with hiking in the jungle, conversations about environmentalism, and lectures on regional animal life and medicinal plants. It was a time when “they were both learning new material together, which was quite a wonderful experience and exposure.” In that process, they came to know each other and themselves anew, and their differences “got worked out in that month in spoken and unspoken ways.” By the end of the trip, Diana and her son had forged the basis for the next stage in their relationship; “it reformulated who we were at really the beginning of my middle years,” and “through the experience we shared, we reconnected to our core values and who we were and what was important to us.” That trip proved to be “pivotal” and ultimately set the stage for why Diana, her son, and his family are now able to live happily together, as three generations under one roof.

For almost half a century, Diana’s home in New York City has also been a very important place in shaping who she has become. Living amidst the “thriving, bustling, cacophony of diversity…the energy and the pace that New York provides” has allowed her ongoing exposure to a rich variety of cultural resources. As she described it, in addition to being able to

    go to any kind or concert from any place in the world, right here in New York City….I love the arts scene, I love, jazz, I love the museums, I love the galleries, I love music, I love dance, [and]…I attend lectures across diverse interests.

For Diana, a “stay-vacation” continues to provide ongoing learning and expanding friendships; she concluded, “There are many scenes I am into that helped transform who I am and how I grow and how I deal at this stage of my life.” Having a park and the river right across street from
her home, and large glass windows from which to view the changing nature around her, Diana has easy access to both an urban and natural wonderland to continue shaping her sense of self through New York City’s distinctive sense of place.

**Bart**

Bart is a 64-year young global regenerative design consultant who is passionate about living systems and a thriving future for all. Early on, Bart was strongly influenced by Lewis Mumford, a sociologist, urban ecologist, and community planner. Bart chose architecture and urban planning as ways of addressing several lifelong, persistent, and vexing questions that held his attention: What is quality of life? What is required to have it? And, what does it mean to be whole? As Bart remarked,

> ultimately I came to the conclusion that we had to be engaged in life on its own terms, not on our terms, so how do we sustain the living systems that we’re part of? For me, the question of quality of life was the aim of the direction that I’ve always posed for myself…[and] just holding that question allowed me to respond to the opportunities when I saw them.

Born in Pittsburgh, PA, Bart moved around a lot in his youth and, by the time he finished university, he had lived in 15 cities and 24 homes. As Bart remarked,

> The cumulative effect of being a traveler and moving when I was a kid actually shaped who I am now in terms of appreciating…change and appreciating different cultures and being comfortable moving around the world…in fact, actually desiring that kind of movement….It was always kind of exciting and I had to roll with it. I’ve always been moving around….It just seems to be part of my personality or DNA that I move.

Still, Pittsburgh was his “‘home’ home, and it had these incredible heart strings.” He continued, “Anybody who’s lived in Pittsburgh has this incredible affinity, unlike any city that I’ve seen. People describe, it has this draw for people…it’s a real nurturing quality and a friendliness. I call it an overgrown high school.” Another factor that Bart attributed to Pittsburgh’s draw was its “intimate” geography. He described it as “a very compressed city due to its geology, and even
the neighborhoods are a fractal of that geology, very compressed valleys…they lock people into
a neighborhood feeling and the whole city is a big neighborhood.”

By comparison, Bart called New England his “heart home,” a very special place that
shares some characteristics with Pittsburgh, and it is where he now resides. He described it as
“somewhat of a nestling area….I’m attracted to areas that encompass you…clefts, small valleys,
and hill rocks where you feel nestled, protected. New England is that, and it’s the nature of the
climate, the nature of the people.” Describing a resonance he felt with New Englanders, Bart said
of them, “they’re hard to break through…but very deep once you get to…compared to other
places I’ve lived that I’ve felt were way too superficial.”

Whereas Bart’s heart place was New England, he further reflected that “the heartest of
the heart places is the Adirondacks in New York State.” Vacationing there as a child, he recalled
that in spite of an 8-hour drive on a Friday night, once he “hit the tree-line in terms of that kind
of pine forest…my heart would go into instant repose. I could get more relaxation in 2 days in
that environment than a 2-week vacation anywhere else.” He continued,

There’s an age, there’s a wisdom to those mountains…The Adirondacks used to be the
highest mountains in the world…this whole Appalachian chain was the largest mountain range apparently on the planet….They’ve been around long enough to have wisdom. The
Adirondacks seem to me to be…nurturing, there’s the forestry, the greenery, the amount
of moisture, the quietness is very attractive to me. New England is an extension of that, if
you will, but the Adirondacks themselves have this unique draw.

When asks if the Adirondacks were in some way a reflection of himself, Bart
acknowledged that being there made him feel wiser. He continued,

I’m not a normal…I’m not a pop kind of guy. I’ve never been part of the mainstream.
…I’ve always been an introvert in terms of reading and exploring new horizons…so
maybe there’s something to that. I feel there is a resonance to the way I live. There’s a
nurturing. There’s a womb-like feel to New England and the Adirondacks …there’s a
burrowing that I particularly like….I feel ensconced.
From Bart’s early experiences, Pittsburgh, New England, and the Adirondacks captured his heart in a powerful, formative way.

Several other places, Bart mentioned more briefly that informed his sense of self were experiences in New Orleans, Louisiana, Ghana, West Africa, and South Africa. As Bart described these, he said,

New Orleans continually strikes me as the most incredible impact of the city on me…I’m kind of a hippie with penny loafers...but in New Orleans....I felt more free than any place on the planet…the people are just kind of uninhibited, and it’s partying and Mardi Gras kind of spirit—you could feel that. It’s really visceral to me…it just hit me upside the head how different it was…but I loved that freedom, that sense of freedom.

Share a more recent powerful experience of place, Bart continued,

I just had the most amazing experience in Ghana just a few months ago—Just a totally different world working with a kingdom and a king and his court on tribal lands in the inner parts of Ghana. It was the most culturally different situation I’d ever been in.

In another profoundly impactful experience, he described why he loved South Africa:

The smell of southern Africa, the odor, the scents in the air are so powerful. I understand British explorers said the same thing. It was the smell that actually attracted them to Africa. There was this steam train…chugging across the plains, and the hot wind whipping the fly specked draperies in the room, and this incredible complex scent that was just heart grabbing. Heart and mind grabbing. That was falling in love, right there.

Bart also shared a disturbing and transformative experience of place which occurred the first time he visited Mexico City, 20 years ago. He described it this way:

A local had invited me to the Zócalo, the center, the big plaza. Once I got into the center of the historical part of Mexico City, I began to sob. Not just quietly. I was uncontrollably sobbing for two and a half hours. I would gulp it down, and then, I would start again, and it kept starting and kept starting.

At the time, Bart had no idea what provoked that response, and once he got out of the area, all that went away. The local responded by saying,

The only thing I can think about is just all the hell that’s gone on here for thousands of years. There’s the Aztec sacrifices, and The Olmecs and The Aztecs, and The Spanish doing what they did to the Aztecs, and The Catholic Church doing what they did to the heretics and The Aztecs, the sacrifices and sacrifices and deaths and deaths.
Bart then shared that on a trip to Mexico City, 10 years ago, he again experienced a very similar feeling in a square just Northeast of the Zócalo. As he described it,

I’m standing out there in this courtyard area plaza, and I’m feeling that same overwhelming emotion start to hit me again. By this time I was used to Mexico City, so I’d gotten over that, but there it was. I was just sitting there and ruminating, and all of a sudden this emotion came up, and two old guys who were hanging around, they looked at me and caught each others’ eyes. They could sense what I was going through, and one guy just took his fist and pumped his heart, just hit his heart, boom, boom, boom, and nodded to me, acknowledging that anguish.

Bart’s experiences in Mexico City were “overwhelmingly…a total sledgehammer to the psyche…an incredible pathos of energies there that just hadn’t been reconciled.” It also became a catalyst for him to reflect more deeply about how Native People are treated in general.

This led Bart to share a more recent experience of place in New Zealand that he described as “actually the most powerful social experience I’ve ever had on the planet.” Working with Maori Elders, Auckland City Council, and a very powerful Maori woman linguist, Bart explained how New Zealand is “the only place… where they have actually worked through that bullshit…with the Maori and the European culture of New Zealand, where both cultures are becoming one, and the European culture, The Pākehā, are actually learning Maori traditions.”

Maori greetings, signage, songs, language, and culture are now becoming embedded in the collective culture. Bart further described how the Maori Language is “powerfully symbolic and emblematic of how living systems actually work…not linear, not abstract. Even the word Maori means shimmering…the great shimmering of clear, white, bright light.”

Through his work in New Zealand, and as a result of his myriad of profound experiences of place, Bart is now able to serve across diverse cultures and stakeholders, to fulfill his mission, which is “to be a bridge” between cultures, past and future, “spiritualizing the material, or materializing spirituality.” He noted, “Personal development is key to doing this work” through “self-observing and self-remembering….How do we consciously evolve? If I was not doing that,
For Bart, his work and firm offers him the opportunity to “work in provinces beyond ableness…we are always re-generating ourselves…it’s a continual investigation into who we are and who we’re becoming.” Bart concluded with two thoughts:

Why we use place the way we do, or why we source from place, is because place is the one thing, if you want to use that term, the one aspect of life that is neutral….It’s your home. And everyone wants to love their home…and so we find that it’s an incredible entry point to begin to cohere people. What we actually do is we help people fall in love with life again through that experience…”

And finally,

The experiences of all the places that I’ve worked, and there’ve been some phenomenal experiences, have taught me how every place is a unique living organism, and that is powerful. The question that we’ve disciplined ourselves to ask is what is the essence of this place? What is core?…We prefer the term place-sourced design as a concept. Place-based kind of works, but place-sourced is actually more powerful because the source is the sociological, economic, evolutionary trends. What makes this place vital, viable, and evolutionarily capable is the key to what makes a place a healthy, living organism….If you don’t understand the role a place plays in its system, just like we, you and I…each have a unique role to play…it’s important to discover that. Then we can be really contributory, and if we’re all working from our essence, then we’re going to have this incredible dance together.

Ralph

Ralph is a 73-year-young former professor, now retired, who continues to write, publish, and lecture as well as work locally and internationally in community development. He has had a rewarding academic career as an environmental design educator and landscape architect.

Although a sociologist, in his early career, Ralph worked as an elected official in North Carolina local politics toward another passion of his, that of designing for community participation and ecological democracy.

Ralphs’s early experiences of place played a crucial role in his identity formation. Describing himself as having a profound attachment to place, Ralph said, “I am undoubtedly a product of my place. My identity is my place.” Ralph described an early period of time in his
life, “from about 1948 to 1968, that I feel like I was truly on slow cooking, and that the place was just shaping me every day, with just normal everyday events.” He continued,

all of those formative years, I was truly simmering, and simmering is just the perfect word, because I was and still am an angry…there’s a part of me that’s just angry. I don’t like injustice to myself, unfairness to myself, and I cannot tolerate it when I see it for other people. Simmering was both about cooking a big stew, and seeping into my bones, but also just not quite boiling over. I would say that my fundamental identity is a small town farm boy on simmer.

Ralph referred to his family farm in North Carolina with a sense of great affection. He said,

I am as certain as I am of anything that I can touch, like wood or water, I am as certain of anything that that land of the farm loves me, and I love it. I love it partly…because of everything that happened there, and partly just the joy it gives me.

Ralph’s family farm has offered him “such a sense of safety…it seemed stable…it was a place that I always knew I would be taken care of, and that place still takes care of me.” Further clarifying his attachment to his family homestead in North Carolina, Ralph responded to his grandson one day when discussing the family home, saying, “Yeah, that house does love you…you are now the fourth generation that house has loved, this place loves us.” He continued,

Now in retrospect, I can see that the values that that place inculcated are just fundamental to me. In many, many ways, there is no separation between my skin and that dirt. My relationship with that place, I think is good for that place. I think that place knows that I love it.…I believe that the place has the capacity to heal me…when I go to…where I mostly farmed, I can feel my heart rate slow down, and if I measure my blood pressure, it will be significantly lower from when I take it in Durham, to when I am at the farm.

Despite’s Ralph’s clarity about the significance of his family farm to his sense of self, He also became aware, particularly once he went off to university, that there was a perception that “being from the South meant you were slow and dumb.” At conferences and in graduate school, he was mocked for his Southern accent, which made him feel that “being a small town farm boy was a matter of embarrassment.” With time, however, Ralph came to the realization that being a small town farm boy was perfectly okay. He said, “I was aware that everything you
needed to know about environmental planning and architecture, I had fundamentally learned by farming.”

Ralph described North Carolina as “The Land of the Second Sons,” where, unlike the first sons from Virginia who inherited everything, North Carolina became home to those second and third sons, who didn’t inherit any land; it was, “aside from slavery, an amazingly egalitarian place and extremely modest landscape,” with the exception of two aspects: racial prejudice and racist segregation. In contrast to other White boys he knew, whose only exposure to Black people was as servants, Ralph worked the tobacco crops on the farm alongside Shorty Lawson, a Black tenant farmer who Ralph described as “the hardest working person I ever knew.” Enduring significant pain while doing nasty, grueling, and brutally hard work alongside Shorty, Ralph came to emulate him and respect his work ethic and incredible concentration. Thus began a “slow simmering” against every negative stereotype against “the African American as being lazy, shiftless, etc.” As he recalled,

Those kinds of moments in the landscape, it just got etched into my brain, and then my heart, and then my bones. Every time…I go to that field, that field still calls up my memory of Shorty Lawson. It calls up my own identity of being a fighter of prejudice and a champion of the marginalized, or the discriminated against, and it also calls up my own identity of being able to work incredibly hard, and endure significant pain, and to maintain focus… without losing the big picture.

Inspired by his early experiences on the farm, Ralph eventually realized that he could use his professional skills as an organizer and catalyst for social change. He discovered that,

I’ve always been able to work with people who felt slightly marginalized, or really marginalized, or people who were discriminated against, and I’m able to work really well with new immigrants to our country, or fishermen, or farmers, farmers of any kind.

In the spirit of community activist Saul Alinsky, Ralph brought his intolerance for injustice and his respect for diversity and democracy to his work as a community design facilitator, educator, and cross-cultural bridge-builder. His experiences of, and relationship with, the farm had given
him some enduring and essential values to build upon. Ralph’s mid-career and current work is
now informed by his early values and diverse intercultural projects. Looking back on the how his
formative experiences of place shaped his sense of self, he said,

My relationship with that place is extraordinarily personal, and obviously remains really
powerful. The whole time I was away at school as a student, and the whole time I taught
at other places, and the whole time I lived in California, I knew that that [place] was the
center of the world, that going back to [the farm] gave me some centering that was
fundamental to my health, and certainly fundamental to my genuine identity.

When asked how his experiences of place have transformed him, Ralph noted that his
community work in Asian countries has enabled his spirituality to evolve through a place-based
approach to religion. More specifically, a greater awareness of the presence of a “community
god” or genius loci, and an acknowledgement of the value of rituals and sacred places has
allowed for greater meaning and depth in his work.

More recently, Ralph is bringing the full range of his experience, wisdom, and love of
place to the city of Durham, North Carolina. Working with a racially balanced community of
diverse individuals on the development and evolution of the rapidly expanding downtown area,
Ralph has the opportunity to bring together community members in a way that continues to
respect the sacredness and history of place, while also challenging the leadership to remain
inclusive as they “shape their future based on their real genuine identity.”

Gina

Gina is a 52-year-young community builder, sacred place-maker, human development
educator, facilitator, and organizational consultant. Originally from Germany, Gina has lived in
Canada, Australia, and the United States. She has also traveled extensively, acting as a bridge
across cultures, which is a role she naturally took to when she discovered an affinity to more
deeply understand experiences of liminality. Gina has a sensitivity to, and appreciation for,
sacred places, having had numerous powerful experiences of place that she feels have shaped her in important ways.

Growing up in Germany, unhappy and the youngest of five children, Gina never felt a sense of resonance with that place as her home. As she described it,

I felt like I could not breathe in Germany. The creative part of me, the expressive part, the part that was really hungry for life, did not get fed. I was not seen. My options seemed really limited over there. It was as though the path of my life had already been chosen. By choosing to go elsewhere and then choosing not to return, all of the sudden there was this unbelievable amount of possibility, but also danger of course.

Setting her sights initially on working for a year abroad in Vancouver, Canada, Gina also knew she wanted to visit California, and when an opportunity arose to travel there, she took it, and eventually made her way to Del Mar, in the San Diego area. There, Gina found work and a little place to live near the beach, with an ocean view in “one of the most gorgeous places in the world.” Despite her limited English language skills and lack of legal papers, Gina knew she did not want to go back to Germany, and letting go of her open return airline ticket, she found she had begun to “fall in love with this place.”

Gina experienced several formative and transformative experiences in her new “home” of California. Initially living as an undocumented illegal immigrant, Gina feared she might be stopped by the police, discovered, or deported at any time. Narrowly missing being caught by border patrol because they were looking for illegal Hispanics, and they overlooked her because she was White, Gina thereby came to understand clearly White privilege. As she described it, “that encounter was what really brought home…okay, I am sort of in the margins here, at the edge…invisible,” and as a result, “I have a lot of empathy for what is going on right now with the immigration issues and the deep fear that people have…to be ripped away from the place they have begun to love or depend on.” She concluded, “What this raises for me is that place is
not just a place, but it is the culture that inhabits the place that adds a whole other level of what a place is about.”

Gina was also keenly aware that no one knew her in this new place, and this “confrontational fact” made her reflect more deeply on important life questions. These included, “What is family for? Why do friends matter? What does it mean to be free? And what does it mean to not be known and to get lost?” Early on, Gina learned that “loneliness is the golden cage of freedom,” and “there was always a sense that…I was building my life on a sand dune.”

Fortunately, Gina made friends. As she explained, “I did have some people who showed up who were instrumental in my not falling off the face of the earth.” In the process of getting established, she also found other like-minded individuals who shared her sense of adventure. Place then offered her new meanings, such as place as freedom, place as possibility, and place as becoming.

Reflecting on particular experiences of place that had been transformative for her, Gina shared several stories of encounters with sacred space and the mystical. On one extended trip in the Utah desert with a small group of people and a Peruvian Paco shaman priest, Gina found herself working with the elements of the natural world. As she described it,

There was one experience of becoming a stone, sitting with the stone, leaning against the stone. It was an incredible experience of my back melting into the stone and my spine becoming the stone and really experiencing stone-ness. Getting stoned. It was remarkable….Then all those boundaries. I am human, and this is flesh, and this is stone, and rock, and we cannot mingle. All of that dropped away. The stone and I were the same.

In another story of being connected with life through a “heightened awareness,” Gina was reminded of an earlier profound memory connected to a sense of place. On a camping adventure with friends in an area of Germany close to the town of Bingen, named after Hildegard Von Bingen, a 12th century female mystic, Gina shared,
I had a complete mystical experience of sitting at the rim of a canyon…overlooking a valley, and down below was sort of an old ruin of a castle. And there had been some synchronistic events there. In the same area, there was also a European street musician festival that was just beginning. Street musicians were just flooding in and playing this most beautiful music. You know, with drumming, or flute, or guitar, that kind of thing. I was 15, and I was just so young and open and available to all of this. Here we were camping in this beautiful territory. There was one morning I am sitting at the edge of this land, and I am overlooking this valley, and I hear a complete performance of music, of classical music, like Mozart. It was sweeping from the valley with a complete orchestra complex. I mean it was not coming from any one musician I can tell you that…how come? I am sitting here and I am bathed in this music. The sense of being so connected and so surprised and so…what is going on here? You know it was ecstatic in a way. Just by being so alive. As alive as the natural world. And then I fell in love that weekend too.

Musing further on the nature of transformative experiences and what catalyzes them, Gina also shared her thoughts on the importance of ritual and ceremony. She clarified,

Often, in order to have an extraordinary experience, we need to step out of the context that is so familiar to us. There is a way of waking up. So these places elsewhere are an incredible way for us to step out of the mundane and familiar, and to step into the unknown, but also get in touch with the unknown or the more mysterious parts within ourselves. And that is why that is important. But that is also why ceremony is important…ceremony, stepping into ceremony, disrupts our habit of being in the same frame of mind. The ceremony is...Sacred Space…an altered state. Ceremony is an altered state.

Gina further remarked on how transformative experiences of place, whether literal or an inner journey of the mind, are different forms of liminality, which she described as “liminal epistemology…this being between different ways of knowing.” Gina’s own research into, and understanding of, the experience of liminality, ultimately has enabled her to make sense of herself, and her place in the world, as a bridge between different cultures and worlds.

Three final experiences that Gina shared brought together several other dimensions related to sense of place and sense of self. As she described it, the first occurred while on a trip to Peru in the Andes. There, Gina was exploring the notion of salka, which is the Quechua word for undomesticated energy. Making the distinction between an eagle, which is undomesticated and thus salka, and a chicken, which is domesticated, she was trying to understand the full meaning of undomesticated, suggesting that “I think of it as wild, untamed, and dangerous, because it is
unknown…but also, it means nurturing too…and gentleness…it means being with the beauty of
natural life.”

Applying the concept of salka to another of her powerful experience of place, this one in
Botswana, Africa, amidst the Kalahari bushmen, and then a third experience, outside of the
sacred place known as Uluru in the central desert in Australia, amidst the aboriginals, Gina
concluded,

I love those places that are untouched…that is the way I felt, most alive. I say most alive
because it was so vibrant, and so alive, and so different….That land is just completely
pristine. That is an overwhelming experience, powerful and beautiful.

Speaking in those instances, and others, of being able to “feel the soul of the place” when
the place is undomesticated, natural, and pure, Gina confirmed the need and value of having a
“sense of connection with the natural world” in her life. Whether through a weekly ritual of
bringing flowers into her home, or caring for a place in other ways, it is through, as Gina noted,
“the whole, the sacred, and the aesthetic—[which] evoke each other,” that a sense of coherence
in a place is created… as well as, importantly, allowing “a place to be itself.”

Gary

Gary is 53-year young institutional investor, entrepreneur, business consultant, board
member, and nature conservationist. His life circumstances have been significantly impacted
from having lived in very diverse environments and situations. Gary shared five powerful
experiences of place that have shaped him in some way. In his stories, Gary described sometimes
difficult and trying circumstances, which caused him to experience disorienting dilemmas and a
reappraisal of his worldviews.

Growing up during the 1960s and 1970s in Berkeley, California, Gary spent a lot of his
time in his formative years by himself, in nature. He recalled that there was a park with a stream
very close to his home, with a ravine and a tunnel underneath a major road. As he described it,
There were a lot of places for a kid going up and down the escarpment, and different trees, and Laurel trees, and Oak trees, to play around the stream, and climb the trees, and look for animals, and all that sort of stuff which allowed me to be very present in the moment with regards to nature. And, there was a certain freedom around that too. And, there was also a certain level of isolation, because I was by myself in that space.

The child of divorced immigrant parents with no extended family nearby, Gary recalled having few friends with whom to socialize and play. In addition, racial integration and bussing at his elementary school resulted in Gary being bullied, which further isolated him. He explained,

    It was a combination of the social situation which resulted in my being slightly isolated, and then that environment which fostered it…it pushed me and pulled me more into hanging out in the parks, and in the streams, and spending time by myself, because I didn’t feel very socially comfortable, or safe, or welcome.

Gary turned to nature for “solace, peace, beauty, and interest.” His home situation allowed him to be somewhat independent and “it’s what also allowed me to be comfortable in nature by myself, liking nature, liking trees, and smells, and the outdoors. That’s where I was comfortable, and that’s where I felt peaceful.” A botanical garden in the area was another favorite place for Gary, where he would go for the entire day whenever possible. Nearby, he recalled

    A big pond with reeds, cottontails….And there were bullfrogs in there and I would go into the water and look for pollywogs and collect them….And, I think all that led me to collecting insects, and collecting frogs, and lizards, and scorpions, and everything you can imagine…snakes, and garter snakes, and tadpoles for tree frogs, and salamanders. I put them in my room…and it eventually became almost like a natural history museum.

Gary’s formative experiences in nature became even more pronounced, when as a young teenager, he moved to a hippie commune in Northern California with his mother and sister. His new home offered over 2,000 acres to explore, and getting anywhere inevitably required he “go on paths, and over the mountain…through forests, and streams, and valleys, and meadows,” all of which kept Gary thoroughly engaged in nature.
Being in an unstructured environment had its merits. Most notably, Gary had time to himself, and he also had the opportunity to be very social with a wide variety of people. Gary described life at the commune this way:

Spending an afternoon hopping from rock to rock, going up a riverbed, or stream, or whatever, as far as I possibly could, and there was nobody else there….There’s the fun of the balance, and then picking your route, so that made me more oriented towards, I guess, risk, and balance, and outdoors, and independence….If I wanted to spend the entire day going up this stream bed for miles and looking for things, and finding rattlesnakes, and fish, and crayfish, and whatever, I could do whatever I wanted. It was completely open.

He continued,

The place had hot springs, and it had pools, and it was clothing-optional, and there were many, many different areas in the property that people could go. And, they could do yoga, and they could lay out in the sun, and they could take hot baths, and they could snack, and they could talk, and socialize…and every other possible thing. And, it was very warm in the summertime—it was beautiful outside. So, many people stayed outside….And people from all over the world would go there….And, that also created a backdrop of socializing, and lifestyle, and activities that shaped my activities. Because, I was surrounded by adults that lived that way, so then I lived that way and it shaped what I thought was normal and what I thought one would do, or how I would spend my day and it was very haphazard. It was just randomness. I would bump into these people and then I’d talk to them, and then I’d bump into those people…it was very social…and, there was nothing planned…and everything was unpredictable.

Gary also found the commune had some negative aspects. As he described it,

The place had a complete lack of structure, lack of rules…and it attracted people from everywhere, and all walks of life, a huge range of them….One of the negative outcomes of that experience was coming across adults who I couldn’t always trust.

From “people with mental illness, scammers, con artists, fugitives, and drug dealers…to idealistic intellectuals wanting to create a community out of a higher calling,” Gary’s experience of that place put him in contact with “A Noah’s Ark of every possible form of humanity—it was a complete free-for-all.”

Leaving the commune and moving in with his father at age 15, Gary once again was confronted with a completely different environment, this time it was an agricultural town in the Central Valley of California. After three years without any formal education at the commune,
Gary was not only behind in school, but he also lacked any typical cultural moorings that would have helped him fit in at his new home. Once again, he felt like an outsider. He could not relate to his peers, and he became painfully aware that he lacked exposure and knowledge to fit in. His new situation resulted in his feeling anxiety and a lack of belonging.

Life in the Central Valley was a radical departure from Gary’s earlier experiences growing up in Berkeley and the commune. He described it as “suburban middle America…very conservative, more religious, agricultural based, and not highly educated.” Recalling that time and place, Gary said,

Life was very directed. I went to school. I had homework. Things were on a schedule. There were deadlines…everything was more task-oriented…and I had to study all the time. I was in a situation where, if I wanted to do anything with my life, I had to catch up. So that meant that…it took, at least for me, a significant amount of concentration and effort, which caused me to be very singular in my focus, and further isolated.

Gary had limited social interaction at his new home, and with the support of his father, he was able to catch up on his academics, and thereafter pursue a career in engineering, and ultimately, computational finance, investing, and business.

Gary shared another experience of place that, once again, caused him to have to adapt to a radically different environment, which in turn, shaped him in unexpected ways. As he described it,

Going to New York, and living in Manhattan, was a huge culture shock…I learned about what it’s like to live in New York…and restaurants, and retail, and consumption, and stratification, and society, and hierarchy, and making money, and career, and ambition, and discernment, and gradients in social economic channels, and classifications, and all the stuff that high-intensity urban society driven by commerce, money, and success creates….It creates these filter systems and these buckets, and this scarcity in resource, and competition.

He continued,

…and ranking. And availability to opportunities and resources. If you can only afford this type of apartment, then you live in a small studio, as opposed to a penthouse on 5th Avenue. So even your awareness, I mean, when you live in a commune, everything is
pretty much equal. Everything’s sort of just whatever it is. You live in a tent, or this tent, or that tent, or a yurt. It’s not like, “Oh, that’s a much better tent than my tent.” But when you become socialized in a place like Manhattan, social stratification becomes apparent very quickly.

When asked what it was like to make such a radical move, and then how the move to New York changed him, Gary said, “It just kind of blew my socks off, basically…I became more aware of the haves and the have-nots. I think it made me more aggressive, slightly more resentful, more cynical…and more ambitious in certain ways.” Gary described the experience of suddenly becoming aware of social stratification, and how for most of his life he had not been exposed to that, and then “to suddenly realize that the world is not what you thought it was…that was a shock.” In Manhattan, he explained, you are constantly aware of competition. He continued, “Everyday, all day, competition. Manhattan is a city driven by scarcity. It’s a tiny island where it is the pinnacle of standard economic theory based on scarcity…everyone is jockeying for the pull position at an extreme level.”

When asked what he took away from that place and experience, and how, looking back, it shaped him, Gary said he still had a lot of mixed feelings about that place and time in his life. Making a lot of money gave him a sense of accomplishment and security, and he was, to some degree, “brought into the fold” because of it. At the same time, he felt that having money was also isolating, and either way, he still felt like he was mostly an outsider. All of his experiences have given Gary access to “different views on the world…and a form of greater awareness of all these parallel universes.”

Gary shared a final, more recent, powerful experience of place from a trip on the Danube Delta. There, at night, among birds and aquatic life, the frogs would all call out,

And they were so loud, they would drown out everything. And I remember the sky above me, and the stars, and when I was in that place, it removed any daily worries or thoughts from my consciousness, because I was flooded by the chorus, and the auditory input, and all the sound, and the lack of any other distractions except for that, and it forced me into
the present…it was almost impossible to think about anything else when I was in that place. Even if I had wanted to, it pulled me, and placed me, and held me, in that moment. …And it made me aware of the significance and insignificance of things.…Because when you are out of the context of doing, and possessing, and achieving, and comparing, and judging…the relevance of possessing and achieving disappears, because you’re just there, in that situation. And when you add to that this overwhelming sound of a million frogs, all slightly off in time, coming in slightly different directions, three different dimensions of echoing, it was almost like somebody was holding and shaking me, but it was pleasant. It almost felt like I could just surrender into it, and stay there for a long time, and almost be lost into it.

Inquiring further into how that experience fits in his life, or how it might inform his sense of self, Gary explained that at this stage in his life, he was in an in-between place, which he described as “torn.” He continued,

The question is, what kind of lifestyle do I want to live? And then finding an environment that supports that….Where do I want to live that not only supports my identity, but also creates it? There’s part of me that wants to go back to being in nature and having that kind of freedom, and being more in touch with just the present. But then there’s this other tension of achievement, and living in a society…of financial security and expressing myself as a success or a failure, whatever that means.

As Gary then explained, after living in many different homes and places over his lifetime, he’s really not sure where home is, where it might next be, or really, where he belongs.

**John**

John is a 65-year young retired information technology professional, political activist, organizational scholar-practitioner, facilitator, naturalist, athlete, and avid climber. Originally from the Detroit, Michigan area, throughout his career, John has lived in numerous places in the United States, traveled, and eventually settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. John shared three powerful experiences of place that shaped him. All of them, in some way, relate back to his formative experiences with his father in the great outdoors, between the age of 5 and 15.

Recalling their time together near the Black River, close to Lake Huron, in Michigan, John and his dad would “thrash around in the woods,” spend time hiking, climbing, and exploring, and partake in a variety of different “warrior” activities. Although they had some
routines, unplanned activities mostly reigned, and there were always new discoveries. Generally taking place during the summer months, inclement weather also did not deter them. Risk, fear, danger, and accomplishment were essential elements of these hero journeys.

Not sure where they were going exactly, or how their next adventure might unfold, John shared a story of one experience with his father where they explored a box canyon. After walking a mile or two into the canyon, they reached the end and discovered there was no way out except to climb out of it. As John explained it,

It was really steep, and you could climb, but it was really crumbly stuff, so I climbed up first with my dad right behind me, who would catch me if I fell, but it was all pretty dicey. There was a lot of fear, but excitement, and really a sense of accomplishment when we got out, and bonding….A lot of exceptionalism somehow associated with it. I felt pretty special…because I did this thing with my dad, who had confidence. I had confidence we would get through this. I trusted him, but it was like you had to do your business. You know? It’s like I performed. I was at my edge. I was with my dad, and it was in this really cool place.

The box canyon experience exemplified the need for flexibility, “improv” (improvisation), creativity, endurance, and trust, amidst the unknown. Occasionally, cousins or other family members joined, and activities were very competitive, and included slingshots, throwing, shooting, running, and hiding, all of which heightened the competition.

Another important experience John shared was of times spent in “the gravel pit” with his father. Gravels pits were holes, which, once they were dug out and a spring was discovered, and the water table was then reached, these gravel pits would fill up with cold, clear, spring water. John and his father would spend memorable times at the gravel pits. As he described it,

We would swim in these, and then it was hot, so you’d bake. We’d always be in bathing suits and hats and run around fairly naked in the gravel pit, except for the little bathing suit, and just fry, and roll in the dirt, and bake in the sand, and then wash off clean in the cold water. Then we’d lay on the rocks, you know, outside, and then back in the water. It was hot rocks and cold water. It was like does it get any better than this?
Across the road from the gravel pit was Stoney Lake, another place connected with the gravel pit by memories and family history. John shared that the area had “this sense of sacred place.” In addition to camping in the area, getting ice cream, and “NuGrape pop,” his parents had spent a decade there in their early 20s, “playing and running hard together.” His grandfather also used to walk nearby, in a cedar swamp, when he first came to the Detroit area. The gravel pit was a place filled with multi-generational memories and layers for John, but most importantly, it was a place of powerful experiences, including anticipation, love, and a cherished sense of freedom and discovery, all with his dad. John noted that since his gravel pit days, and his “hot rocks, cold water” experiences, he has essentially been re-creating similar experiences throughout his life that “fit that signature.”

Another powerful recurring signature experience for John is Cathedral Peak. Cathedral Peak is an outstanding granite pinnacle in Yosemite National Park. Popular with climbers, it has a rich history in that the first ascent on it was made by John Muir in 1869, and it may have been one of the first known steep ascents made anywhere in the Sierra. Historically, it had a “summit register” at the peak that was signed by those who made it to the top. For John, Cathedral Peak is also imbued with his own long history of climbing. Beyond simple recreations, Cathedral Peak represents a continuation and evolution of his identity formation experiences at the gravel pit. As John explained,

That’s what allowed the resonance for Cathedral Peak to happen. It’s like, yeah, this is my place. It was already sacred to me from these other things, and connecting it with the obvious resonances that other people had with the place and their identities…it’s just obvious from reading that summit register on Cathedral Peak that other people are feeling the same kinds of things I was. I assumed, I still assume, that there’s something about the place that has a tendency to create those feelings in people. It must be a lot of shared commonality… There’s a richness around that, but now being able to track it all the way back to my own identity formation, why it was important to me, is this added piece.
According to John, Cathedral Peak represents three important aspects of his identity. The first is that there is a selection process related to it. He said, “When you reach the peak, and sign the summit registry, you join the club.” The signature is an indicator that “you’re part of a crew that’s gone through a special process to get somewhere.” Second, unless you have gone through that experience, you cannot truly understand it. That brings in the idea of a “warrior mentality.” It is something that, as John described it,

I can share with somebody I don’t even know who has signed that summit register….We both know that we had to fit our hand in a certain crack in a certain way. We found that. I know what that person felt when they felt their hands wrap around the jug inside the crack. I know that….And they know that about me.

The third aspect of John’s identity that is represented by Cathedral Peak is related to a resonance about the place itself. After more than 30 ascents over the last 35 years, John has found that certain people are attracted to having that experience, they are drawn to it, and when they reach the summit, they have the same look on their face that John has had and continues to recognize. As John described it, “I may not know where that person came from, but there’s a pattern about the experience that is a product of the place…there’s a resonance there.” This third aspect of John’s identity is also related to sharing his enthusiasm for places and experiences that excite him, and bring him alive.

When asked if he considered any of his experiences to be transformative, John returned to his previously mentioned idea of “the warrior experience.” To him, transformation is more about incremental change, small iterations, as opposed to big shifts. As he noted,

It was…overcoming a little fear, focusing on what’s in front of me, so I don’t go sliding down to my death…that I could manage my fear and perform. It’s overcoming spiraling fits of anxiety, overcoming the improbable, and then realizing it’s actually well within your capabilities…it’s just one step at a time…a whole lifetime of following these little paths…and ultimately you find yourself in improbable places, getting there with very probable and possible steps.
Max

Max is a 74-year-young pianist and composer, writer, speaker, leadership educator, community and organizational dialogue facilitator, and soulful place-maker. Max shared numerous stories of powerful experiences of place, each of which revealed how different aspect of his identity have been shaped over the course of his life. Not unlike several other participants in this study, Max’s formative experiences of place left an indelible impression on his identity, and those experiences continue to be an ongoing source of enchantment and belonging that he calls upon as a source of inspiration.

Attending YMCA summer camp as a boy on an island in the Canadian Georgian Bay emblazoned a lifetime of memories for Max. As he described it, “what stood out was how much these camps were set up in a way that really celebrated and informed us about the nature of the place that we were in.” The camps captured and communicated a spirit of the land and “the elemental nature of the place.” He continued,

By elemental…I was thinking I was there and totally immersed in this constant interaction of light, and land, and water, and wind…and how it would move through the pine trees. Coming up to Georgian Bay, and that particular part of the rocky coastline…is nature in its most elemental form, untouched really by human hand. Untouched in a sense because it was so much itself there’s really nothing you can do to alter its essential nature or character. That felt like a true expression of what the land could be and what nature could be, and also…its full power…all of those sounds and sensations was just being immersed in this sea of enchantment.

For Max, knowing Georgian Bay exists, both in reality and in his memories, offers him a grounding and reassurance, and “it deepens the longing of connection in a way.”

Another important experience of place for Max was related to his being a church organist in a religious ceremony context. In that setting, Max was able to “take liberties…with music that accompanied the service throughout…through chant, as well as through hymns. So music [was] carried throughout….It would carry this sense of sacred ceremony…calling people together in
community in a sacred way.” Being an organist gave Max the opportunity to experiment with his music to create moments of sacred space in the context of his community. He noted, “being present in the moment was really inspired by those early years in Georgian Bay. It brought the sacred part of nature into a liturgical church service…I think it all carries its roots from those early summers.”

A third experience Max shared that informed his sense of self occurred at a lodge not far from Georgian Bay. There, Max used to spend time playing the old upright piano. He said,

As a pianist I was searching for a voice that would stir an expression of something that really moved my imagination…I think in terms of finding a musical voice…I really hadn’t found one up until that point. I got inklings of it. I knew that it was connected to nature. What part of nature did I want to express in some way?...I was really looking more for a soundscape that would offer a palate for what I might be able to create with the keyboard.

He later described a powerful experience at that time and place. He continued,

As soon as I could feel, I could sometimes sense it, because the land, the air would get quite humid and almost electric on a hot, moist, July afternoon. And I could anticipate that there would probably be a storm to release the tension that was building in the air at that time. And I would feel it in this old ancient rock, actually, in the form of vibration. Because I swore I could actually hear it. It was like a summons. I would be drawn down to the lodge and I’d sit there and accompany the storm. All the subtle nuances and all the strong impulses that were coming from lightning strikes and thunder. Particularly, as the storm moved on, that marvelous moment of freshness and stillness. You could feel this coming off the rock, and the vegetation, and the stones along the water surface. I could encounter a complete and full symphony throughout the duration of the storm.

Max’s rich, eidetic description captured nature as a muse and inspiration for his expression as a pianist and artist. As he explained it, “Maybe that’s the gift of place, that I think it offers, if we’re open to how it speaks to us. It really pulls us back into the elemental aspects of our own nature.”

In what he described as a “radical moment of turning,” Max shared another place-based story that shifted how he saw himself and his path forward. As he told it, the transformative experience occurred in a local hotel and conference center in a town where he used to live, not
far from Georgian Bay. Although refurbished, the place had a reputation in a previous life as a “down and out for the alcoholics in town.” On this occasion, Max had been working at the conference center during the day as an organizational consultant (his other profession), and with the evening off, had opted to take a little time to play some piano for himself in the lounge.

Meanwhile an older man with a precariously perched glass of wine, a holdover from the lounge’s previous life, pulled up a chair to listen. After playing both a well-known tune, and some of his own music, the man requested to hear more of Max’s own work. Impressed, and then inquiring further as to whether Max worked at the hotel, Max indicated that no, he was an organizational consultant. To that, the man responded, “well, how many people do this work that you do?” Max replied that perhaps 20 or 30 did in the Toronto area. After a long pause, the man then asked Max, “Well who’s gonna play your music if you don’t play it yourself?” For Max, that changed everything. Thereafter, he never played anyone else’s music again. As he further explained,

He kind of steered me away….I think it was to give me permission to go back to really reconnect with my thread of inspiration from Georgian Bay and follow that, and not be distracted by thinking I needed to play what I thought other people wanted to hear. And I think that these moments, catalytic moments in a sense, have been opportunities to reposition my way of living so it’s more connected to the places that I have been immersed in, where I’ve lived, what I’m inspired by, and not waver too far away from them.

Max recognized that experience as a kind of serendipitous encounter or gift, and noted that one never knows in what form an angel will appear.

As Max’s career as a pianist began to take off, and he through he was setting aside his organizational consulting work, another “divine intervention” came across his path at a conference on healing and sound. There, as Max recalled, a woman came over to him at one point and said, “You and I have some work to do. We don’t know each other, but my intuition is we have some work to do.” She continued,
My intuition is that your work as a teacher is not over. It’s just beginning. And what you’re needing to learn to do is to speak from the same place that the music comes from. Not from the theories of other people, which has filled your career over 20 years. It’s worked well on that level, but that’s not the kind of teaching that you’re being called to. Now it’s just from a different place… I’d love for you to know how the energetic work is done. Once you have that formed, kind of embodied in your sense of where you’re moving, you won’t need me as much.

Max shared that the woman had come at a critical moment because he had not yet figured out how to bring together those two different aspects of himself.

Not long after, another major turning point in Max’s path occurred in a concert hall in New England. There, Max was playing as a solo pianist to an audience of 500 people. Nervous at that venue, he realized, to his deep concern, that he had played more quickly than usual, and had played his entire repertoire in the first half of the evening. He continued,

I came out to meet the audience and did something, which I had not tried before, which was to actually speak to the audience. This was 500 people in a darkened concert hall. It was something I thought I would never attempt to do. Even though I was a teacher, and I was very interactive with my teaching, and I worked with small groups over a continuing period of time, this was a whole other thing. I realized that what came out were stories, stories I hadn’t ever remembered telling before. But, I think, they found me in filling that space.

Max then realized, as the divinely intervening woman had suggested, that in speaking with the audience, he was allowing the stories and expression to come from the same source as the music. He continued,

By stepping out from the piano, I was opening myself up to a whole other level of vulnerability, to being present in that moment, letting what wanted to come through come through a spoken impression, not only through music. That was an important part of what my connection to place was moving me into, was to speak out that sense of place. As long as I was playing, I could speak and play. It would all be the same current. The same current actually found its way into my writing later on, as well. I realized the initial current that I opened to, I think, in those formative summers on Georgian Bay, began to continue to open up into other forms of expression.

Max’s current work involves a marrying of his many talents and selves, all of which revolve around his inquiry into the soul of place, the transformation of self, and the evolution of
communities through self-reliance, collaborative processes, and capacity building. To that end, Max continues to apply his skills as a writer, dialogic facilitator, place-maker, and pianist/composer. In reawakening the essential and elemental narratives that speak to place, Max has discovered emergent patterns that both intrigue him and beckon for further exploration. Some of these patterns include homecoming, belonging, regenerativity, and celebration, and they dovetail and overlap with many of the themes that have presented themselves across the participants’ stories in this research. Reflecting back on powerful experiences of place, Max expressed a sentiment that rang true for many of the study participants:

I think it’s a gift when we can reconnect with some of those formative moments. I think that some of our life often announces itself in these early moments, if we’re open to experiencing them and reclaiming them. Our uncertainty for the future is so overwhelming that it consumes us. We lose a sense of how our sense of place in the past actually foretells something of what the nature of our future might be.

Data Analysis

Participants’ powerful stories of place, and how those experiences have shaped their sense of self, formed the basis of the analysis conducted in this study. The themes that emerged from the data arose out of multiple readings of each interview transcript. Audio recordings were also carefully re-listened to as a reminder for the energy, spirit, tone, and pacing in each conversation. The first step I took before going over each transcript was to review the four interlinking dimensions of Finlay and Evans’s Relational Approach. The four interlinking dimensions were (a) open presence, (b) embodied inter-subjectivity, (c) dialogic co-creation, and (d) entangled selves. Reflecting on each dimension, I then carefully considered how they applied to my connection with each person and their overall story, as well as the particular stories they shared in the interviews. In this process, I gained a strong sense of each person and how their experiences shaped who they became, and for some, where they might next be headed.
I had initially anticipated that each person would share between one and three powerful experiences of place, based on the idea that participants would include experiences that formed, informed, or transformed them in some way. As the conversations unfolded however, participants shared far more than I anticipated about themselves and their lives. This was a fortuitous outcome, because I got a much better sense of who they are and the role that place played in their development. The result of longer and more involved conversations was also a considerable amount of data. From this larger data set, I selected 45 noteworthy stories of powerful experiences of place, with each person’s content including between three and eight stories.

Each transcript was initially re-read for accuracy and to get a sense of the whole. This was done with the accompaniment of the audio recording. At that time, corrections were made to the transcripts, which proved essential because upon closer scrutiny, there were numerous errors, which in some cases, significantly changed the meaning of the content.

I coded each transcript using in-vivo coding. In-vivo was selected because I wanted to get as close as possible to what was alive for each person’s experience, and one of the primary goals of this genre is “to adhere to the verbatim principle” (Saldana, 2016, p. 206) by using the words of the participants themselves. The root meaning of in-vivo is “that which is alive” (Saldana, 2016, p. 105). This method felt resonant with the methodological choice of phenomenology. I also made notes on each of the transcripts about my own thoughts and considerations about ideas to follow–up on with respect to further discussion, resources, or theoretical connections.

After reviewing and coding each of the transcripts, I then began compiling two master lists based on some general themes that had emerged from the coding. The two master lists were: “Part 1,” which was an overview based on emergent themes of participants’ powerful
experiences of place, and “Part 2,” which was divided into types of experiences, based on whether they were formative, informative, or transformative to the person’s sense of self. The second part of the data analysis also organized participants’ experiences into overarching dimensions of peak, plateau, nadir, epiphany, or liminal, or in some cases, a combination of dimensions. Each participant’s content was named and color-coded to keep all the content and quotations clearly organized.

I then went back to each participants’ transcript to create a synthesis of the essence of their larger individual story. I selected key experiences to include in each composite description. I then wrote up each person’s story. Making further notes as I proceeded through all the stories of the eight participants, I looked for similarities, differences, or anomalies in the data.

**Part 1: Powerful Experiences of Place**

Starting with the general overview of themes that emerged from the in-vivo coding related to place experiences, I then compiled 11 category lists. I reviewed each list, looking for any redundancies or overlapping ideas, which there were. Sensing the need to create some hierarchies in the data, I reflected more deeply on the larger themes to determine which content was actually a subset of a larger concept. Looking at the first part of the primary research question, which was an examination of descriptions of powerful experiences of place, I arrived at six key themes:

1. Natural Elements and Geography;
2. Community, Roots, and Belonging;
3. Aliveness, Wholeness, and the Cycle of life;
4. Freedom, Adventure, and Escape;
5. Possibility, Becoming, Liminality, and the Unknown;
6. Enchantment, the Sacred, and Coherence.

Each of these themes had a diversity and richness to the content, which I wanted to include. Further, with each person sharing between three to eight stories, I wanted to compile and present the data in a way that would comprehensively include individuals’ stories but also show how they contributed to the larger themes. A summary of these findings is provided in Table B1, Appendix B.

**Natural elements and geography.** All participants discussed natural elements and geography as significant to their powerful experiences of place and how these shaped their sense of self. All of the places mentioned either directly or indirectly were linked in some way with participants’ identities. Participants easily recalled a wide variety of physical geographic settings and natural elements, some in detail. The places and natural elements had clearly left an indelible impression on them, as their descriptions were vivid and alive, as if they were reliving the experience.

Physical geography featured prominently as a factor that enabled transformative experiences. Participants mentioned the following physical geographic characteristics: mountains, hills, peaks, summits, canyons, valleys, wilderness, geological formations, rocks, desert, and vistas. For example, Bart described the importance for him of living in a place where he felt “nestled,” “in a compressed valley,” “protected,” and “encompassed.” For Bart, both Pittsburgh and New England gave him those experiences. John shared a story of hiking to the summit of Cathedral Peak in Yosemite, and how, all along the way up, and then once he reached the top, he experienced a sense of resonance, which he described as “This is my place.” Gina mentioned the importance of vistas, natural beauty, and aesthetics in several of her stories. She recalled “sitting at the rim of a canyon…overlooking a valley…and being as alive as the natural
world.” Gina also pointed to the importance of experiencing landscapes that are “pristine” and “pure.” She said, “I love those places that are untouched and…most alive. That is the way I felt…most alive.” Gina attributed the “soul of a place” to it being “allowed to be its natural self.”

Water elements also featured in participants’ stories, and they included rivers, pools, bays, waterholes, islands, and coastline. Max mentioned how important his time was at summer camp on an island in Georgian Bay. Describing the water and nearby “rocky coastline” as “elemental” and “untouched by the human hand,” Max also appreciated “nature…in its full power,” and “untouchable in a sense because it was so much itself there is really nothing you can do to alter its essential nature or character.” John shared the delight he recalled at “the gravel pit” with his father, where, amidst the sun and a gravel-pit waterhole, he enjoyed summer afternoons filled with the experience of “hot rocks and cold water.”

Trees, forests, jungles, rainforests, meadows, gardens, and plants, both wild and cultivated, were also mentioned by all participants. Carole shared how important it was for her, as a child, to be able to wander and play in “an overgrown... landscaped, garden, estate land.” She also said she was “completely thrilled” and “incredibly excited” to be able to spend time in her newly landscaped back garden. There, she could “get back to growing things,” and “nurture things, and plant things, and watch them grow, and feel safe.” John shared a story of precarious adventure when, as a boy with his father, they “thrashed around in the woods, and it was always a little scary, because it was not like a forest, where you could see where you were going.”

Animals and insects were also featured in some participants’ stories. Gary described how, while living at a commune, “there was a significant nature component” to his daily life. He continued, “If I wanted to spend the entire day going up this spring bed for miles, and looking for
things, and finding rattlesnakes, and fish, and crayfish… I could.” He also mentioned “pollywogs… bullfrogs… salamanders… snakes… lizards… and insects” as part of his visits to a nearby Botanical Garden. Diane told of being on a trip in the desert in India, where she described a camel as her means of travel. Gina shared a feeling, in one experience, as if she had become a bird, and suddenly having the sense that she “took off in flight… and was flying over the canyon.” As she described it, “I had become a bird.” Her experience occurred when she was in the desert in Utah, while working with a Peruvian Paco.

Cultural geography, a subset of human geography, was also included as an aspect of some participants’ experiences. Cultural geography refers to issues such as immigration, cultural assimilation, cultural landscapes, cultural ecology, and spirit of place, among other topics. Gina shared a story about living as an undocumented immigrant in California for several years, before she obtained the necessary papers to become eventually naturalized. Ralph told the story of “The Shorty Lawson Museum of the Black Tenant Farmer” that he is currently preserving as a tribute to a childhood man he idolized on his family farm in North Carolina. Bart shared a powerful experience of grief and anguish when he visited the Zócalo in Mexico City. There, he inexplicably and uncontrollably sobbed for several hours. He came to realize his emotional experience was an expression of his visceral sensitivity to invisible, but no less real, energetic factors of a long history at that locale of sacrifices, death, and other atrocities.

Community, roots, and belonging. All of the participants mentioned the importance of community, roots, and belonging as key aspects of their powerful experiences. Human connection, love, and attachment fell within this category, as did history, security, safety, stability, home, haven, and a sense of inclusion. Some participants described love of a particular place, which also included a strong sense of history about the place itself and their relationship
with it. In some cases, the place had multi-generational storylines; in other instances, the place held meaning based on the individual’s own history and aligned values with the place.

Ralph shared his feelings about his family farm in North Carolina, a place that held sacred significance to him. The land had been settled by his grandfather, and having a grandson of his own now, the land has a history of five-generations in his family. Ralph described his connection to that land and place as a kind of reciprocal love affair. He said, “I am as certain as anything that the land of the farm loves me, and I love it. I love it partly…because of everything that happened there, and partly just the joy it gives me.” He continued,

My relationship with that place is extraordinarily personal, and obviously remains very powerful. The whole time that I was away at school as a student, and the whole time I taught at other places, and the whole time I lived in California, I knew that that [place] was the center of the world.

For Ralph, the family farm represents history, identity, legacy, comfort, stability, and “such a sense of safety…I knew I would always be taken care of, and that place still takes care of me.”

Carole shared a story that spoke to her sense of belonging and community. While living at Findhorn in Scotland, Carole described Findhorn as “an extraordinary place of caring, and loving, and supporting each other, and working for each other.” Carole went on to say she was “heartbroken that I had to leave this place where I had really fallen into this community that emanates love.” Carole described her time and experience at Findhorn as “without a doubt, one of the most transformative years and places of my life.”

Max described his formative experiences on Georgian Bay as giving him a sense of rootedness and belonging to that geographic area. He clarified, “Knowing that it’s [Georgian Bay] nearby is somehow reassuring…a place can offer a grounding even if we’re not on it in some way, but being in proximity to it.” Max shared another story about being a church organist
in that geographic area and having the opportunity “of creating sacred space through music.” He described it this way:

It was a sense of being a sacred community. I think what’s significant is that it was probably my first awareness of being present to bringing something that was already alive…it found its way, initially through nature, [and] it also found its way through community. And that may be what’s reflected in the work I am engaged in now…most of it’s in community. I could be off at an island in the middle of a lake somewhere, in pure bliss, but somehow that wasn’t enough. It needed to be something that carried back into the human community.

John recalled his experiences at Stoney Lake, a recreational area where his family, and his grandfather, had spent time as he was growing up. John revealed the importance of that time and place, which gave him a multi-generational sense of rootedness and belonging. John also shared his experiences over many years of climbing the summit of Cathedral Peak in Yosemite. As someone who has made that ascent almost annually for over thirty-five years, John described being part of “a club of people…that ended up getting to the top of Cathedral Peak…you’re part of a crew that’s gone through a special process to get someplace.” John’s sense of camaraderie, community, and belonging with his select fellow climbers is an important part of his identity and connection with that “sacred place.”

Three of the eight participants had different perspectives from the other five about their experiences of community, roots, and belonging. Gina described a generally negative association with the pull of the past and her roots in Germany. Ultimately choosing to immigrate to the United States, Gina found belonging and community among “a milieu of people” who were like-minded adventurers, who thought of themselves more as people of many places. In a similar vein, both Bart and Gary moved around a lot growing up, and for them, community, roots, and belonging take the form of “multicenteredness”—their identity being temporally shaped, but not confined by, a singular fixed location or a few, very select locations. As Bart remarked, he had
moved around growing up, and by the time he graduated from college, he had lived in 15 cities and 24 homes. After he had graduated from college, he clarified,

I couldn’t imagine sitting at a desk…the first job that I had was actually getting on a plane every four days traveling around the eastern half of the United States and Canada working on projects in a large architecture firm. It’s interesting…I have been a traveler ever since. It just seems to be part of my personality or DNA that I move.

Bart’s experiences might also be described as arising out of a “global sense of place,” which suggests a conception of place as a less attached, and a more permeable, ever-changing, and unbounded construct—as a flexible route, as opposed to a static root.

Aliveness, wholeness, and the cycle of life. The category of aliveness, wholeness, and the cycle of life, the largest category, had a noticeable somatic, sensory, and energetic orientation. The most mentioned subgroupings in this category were aliveness, rejuvenation, renewal, energetic current, living systems, regeneration, well-being, flow, peace, harmony, balance, and thriving. This category also included variations in energetic descriptors and experiences of the senses. The terms alive and aliveness were used frequently by most participants, suggesting a link between participants’ own sense of aliveness and the energetic qualities of a place.

Referring back to how his early powerful experiences of place were energetically inspirational sources for his sense of aliveness as a pianist and composer, Max described the connection between place, aliveness, and music as

kind of a current that’s ever present, even in the silence when I’m not playing. People can still feel the notes that are palpable in the air, because they linger from when I had played, and anticipating that there will be a time when I play again. Even in long extended times of silence…the music is sort of a hovering current, kind of like a vibratory current that runs through me…

He continued,
Maybe that's the gift of place, that I think it offers, if we are open to it, is how it speaks to us. It really pulls us back into the elemental aspects of our own nature. And some of this, things that are superfluous, that we think we have to take on, can kind of drop away.

Gary shared a powerful experience related to energy, vibration, flow, and peacefulness that occurred at night on the Danube River Delta. Flooded by a chorus of frogs, amidst the sky and the stars, he described being brought into the flow of the present moment. He said,

The auditory input…pulled me, and placed me, and held me in that moment…it was almost like somebody was holding and shaking me, but it was pleasant. I almost felt like I could just surrender into it, and stay there for a long time, and almost be lost in it.

Carole told a story of restoration and regeneration while living and working in Sheffield in the United Kingdom. Spending time on the weekends in the Peaks District National Park was “a savior” for her. As she described it, “It just re-injected me with connection to the land, connection to beauty, in comparison with the sort of really sad industrial ugliness of Sheffield. So it sort of kept me alive.”

Bart shared several stories of energetic and sensory experiences of place. One occurred on a trip to South Africa. He said,

I can tell you the smell of Africa is why I love Africa. The smell of southern Africa, the odor, the scents in the air are so powerful….There was this steam train…chugging across the plains and the hot wind whipping the fly-specked draperies in the room, and this incredible complex scent that was just heart grabbing. Hear and mind grabbing. That was falling in love, right there.

Conversely, Bart also told of two places in the United States that were an energetic “repellant” for him. He continued,

One is Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, and the other is Jamestown, New York. When I drive through those communities or visit them, and I’ve worked in both, I get destabilized, disoriented. I feel dizzy actually. There’s some weird energy…Maybe it’s an energy vortex, maybe there are haunts or ghosts or some kind of spirit….I don’t have any kind of bias for or against the spirit world or ghosts, or anything else. I don’t disbelieve and I don’t believe in them, but that’s one place where I can say yeah, they might exist. They’re incredibly, well, destabilizing is the best word….These two places are so destabilizing to me, that I can’t actually go there for too long.
Bart’s stories of the presence of sensory, energetic, and visceral sensibilities rang true for all participants in one way or another.

All participants, perhaps because of their age and being in the second half of their lives, shared their reflections, in some way, about being part of a larger, universal whole, and attempting to make sense of their place in it. They all, both explicitly and implicitly, mused on the kinds of questions that Bart articulated, such as: “What does it mean to be whole?” and “what does it mean to have a quality life?” Bart shared some of his impressions when he offered,

we [have] to be engaged in life on its own terms, not our own terms, so how do we sustain living systems that we’re part of?…We prefer the term “place sourced” as a design concept….What makes this place vital, viable, and evolutionary is the key to what makes a place a healthy living organism.

Speaking to the complexity and richness of the cycle of life, Diana spoke about a powerful experience she had while in India. She described it this way: I was going to a Hindu temple, where, in the backyard, [there] was a river, and they cremated the bodies. Along the river…women would bring their babies to play on the grass. In the river, boys would be swimming, and right next to them there would be the burning body, and next to that would be somebody shaving his face, and next to that would be somebody doing their dishes. It was a mid-blowing experience for me. It was Indian life. Life, and toward death, and death, all in one backyard….That’s what they do. It just happens that they are cremating bodies. It’s just a part of their life. It’s just a continuation of generations living together.

**Freedom, adventure, and escape.** Participants shared many stories, which embraced the topics of freedom, adventure, and escape. Other subsets of this category included independence, exploration, discovery, mobility, and various aspects of “escape.” With respect to escape, participants mostly shared stories of places or situations they were escaping from, such as danger, oppression, expectations, pain, self-limits, judgments, fear, or rejection.

John described the multiple stories of freedom, adventure and exploration related to his experiences climbing. He said,
There’s something in Yosemite called a grade 4 [climb]—it just takes everything you’ve got, but then you need to have enough juice left over to get down, because you don’t have any overnight sleeping gear, but things happen on the climb, so you get there and it’s too late, or you finish in the dark…you know, you coil your rope up like a rug on the rock and then take 10-minute turns where you lay down on it, because it’s warm. Then switching off with the other person. Because it’s their turn…watching the moon cut across the sky for hours, doing jumping jacks to stay warm. Knowing that, it’s like yeah, that sounds scary, I was afraid of that. You know, all day long I was climbing with fear, because I wasn’t going to make it off in time, and then I didn’t….But a million things like that…like getting caught on the Matterhorn, total white out, lost, you know, can’t even find the ridge I’m supposed to be on, avalanches rumbling on either side.

For John, the adventure of climbing offers him similar experiences to those he had with his father at the gravel pit, in box canyon, and in any number of other spontaneous locations and situations he and his father found themselves in.

Diana also mentioned freedom and adventure in many of her stories. She described her time in Salvador Bahia, Brazil attending Mardi Gras as “quite an experience. The whole city shuts down for a week, and the parade goes 24 hours a day nonstop for days. It brought up a lot of raw emotions…there’s a freedom in that rawness….” On the next part of that same trip, Diana shared a bit about her “trip down the Amazon River on a riverboat to explore the rainforest for a week.” She described the joy of discovery and learning as she, her son, and their guide hiked through the rainforest, with the guide providing insights about regional flora and fauna. She said, “Each day was just an amazing lecture for several hours as we walked….We were both learning new material together, which was quite a wonderful experience and exposure.”

On a third adventure, in India, Diana described how the trip enabled a sense of independence in her, after having overcome numerous trying situations over the course of her four months there. On that trip, her explorations and discoveries were both external and internally transformative. A perpetual adventurer, Diana also shared her love of her home town of New York City. There, she goes on regular “stay vacations,” which for her, serve to “culturally inspire me, to rebound me, to refresh me, to move me forward, to deepen me, to
expand me…there’s an excitement or an adventure element to place that allows, at least for me, change.”

With respect to escape, participants mostly shared stories of places or situations they were escaping from, such as danger, oppression, expectations, pain, self-limits, judgments, fear, or rejection. The most frequently mentioned or suggested was escape from self-limits.

For Gary, a nearby park offered freedom, discovery, and solace amidst the natural world. It also offered escape from being picked on and targeted for bullying at his primary and elementary schools. As he explained it, “Being a target…pushed me and pulled me more into hanging out in the parks, and in the streams, and spending time by myself, because I didn’t feel very socially comfortable, or safe, or welcomed in general.”

Gina opted to move from, and in a sense escape, her childhood roots and home in Germany. As she described it,

I felt like I could not breathe in Germany. The creative part of me, the expressive part, the part that was really hungry for life did not get fed. I was not seen. My options seemed really limited over there. It was as though the path of my life had already been chosen. Immigrating to California gave Gina an escape from the expectations and oppression she felt in her native Germany.

Carole and her family were initially moved to a large garden estate as a response to higher risk of danger from war in London during World War II. The garden estate offered her freedom to roam, adventure, and exploration, and also escape and safety. Carole was also alone a lot, and for her, as was the case for Gary and to some extend Gina, the natural world provided solace, nurturing, and escape from loneliness.

**Possibility, becoming, liminality, and the unknown.** The themes of possibility, becoming, liminality, and the unknown were consistently present in all the participants’ stories.
Carole shared her story of using healing imagery as a way of contributing to her recovery process from cancer. Despite the presence of fear, and feeling as if she was in a state of liminality and the unknown, Carole said she found healing imagery to be “a very very significant component of all the healing I was doing.” She also spoke about how she would conjure up images of places like Iona, and Findhorn, and the Zen Center, all places, which for her were therapeutic landscapes. When a second cancer returned, she used it again, with new images of healing places, and that too, she felt, was vital to her overcoming cancer the second time. For Carole, having faith and holding on to the possibility of becoming fully healthy again was also vital to her recovery.

When discussing his music in the context of a sacred ceremony, in a community religious setting, Max shared the following:

I think the whole aspect of how to create music that is an extension of what is unfolding in the moment, so that it’s not a performance where I’m dictating the experience, but rather something that’s already unfolding, that I’m amplifying through the music, I think, was the ground for so much that followed. I think all of the recordings I did, were in one way or another, an expression of a particular aspect or particular narrative in the imagination that could be amplified through what I was playing.

This comment by Max is a reflection of how, as a musician, he is continuously engaged in the process of creating, which requires a suspension of the known. Being present and dwelling in the unfolding unknown moment allows for the emergence of a spark, which then invites the creative muse to inspire new possibilities.

Gina told a story of how, on a safari in a remote area in Africa, she was brought to her “edge place.” By that she meant being in a kind of liminal place and state, ready to test or embark on the unknown. She remarked, “it was totally a different place, where I did not know
anybody, did not speak the language, different culture, everything was different.” Gina expressed a similar pattern when she described her experience of moving to Del Mar, California, and she did not know a soul. She later elaborated on the experience of liminality:

The thing is, is that too often in order to have an extraordinary experience, we need to step out of the context that is so familiar to us. There is a way of waking up. So, these places elsewhere are an incredible way for us to step out of the mundane and familiar and to step into the unknown, but also to get in touch with the unknown or the more mysterious parts within ourselves.

Gina’s insights offer a timely segue into the next theme, that of enchantment, the sacred, and coherence.

**Enchantment, the sacred, and coherence.** In at least one of their stories, all participants, either directly or indirectly, mentioned some aspect of the themes of enchantment, the sacred, and coherence. Other descriptors within this category included beauty, awe, synchronicity, surprise, delight, divine intervention, the mystical, heightened awareness, ritual, and sacred ceremony.

When speaking of his time in Asia, Ralph shared how his awareness of the spirit of place, or genius loci, took on more meaning and significance for him. Ralph spoke of several shrines, temples, and towns, which for him, were endowed with sacredness. He also mentioned a sense of enchantment and sanctity whenever he spoke about his family farm in North Carolina.

Diana recalled a story in the Amazon Rainforest, which relates to this theme. As she described it, she was awakened during the night and “I heard drumming. I heard a ritual. …Everyone else was asleep, but I was wide-awake, listening to this drumming. And it went on for hours, and it was rhythmic.” Although no one else had heard the sounds, and the guide assured Diana that no ritual had taken place, later that day, on a discovery hike, Diana and her guide found the site where the ritual had taken place. Remaining at the site were two artifacts—
Diana took the candle, and as a recognition of the sacredness of that memory, she noted, “I have that candle on my altar, to this day.”

Gina shared her experience in Bingen, Germany, which she described was “a huge sort of ‘aha’ for me.” In her recollection of sitting on the rim of a canyon overlooking a valley, Gina included the following words among the descriptors of her experience: awe, beauty, mysticism, surprise, synchronicity, heightened awareness, ecstatic, connected, and in love. Reflecting on the sacred, she said, “Sacred space is an altered state. Ceremony is an altered state…a change of state [is] a change of consciousness.” Gina also mentioned having explored liminal epistemology in her own research, which she described as “this being between different ways of knowing.” For Gina, powerful experiences of place, ceremony, and ritual are important because they “disrupt our habit of being in the same frame of mind,” which allow us to “step into the unknown, but also get in touch with the unknown or the more mysterious parts within ourselves.”

Carole mentioned two rituals in her connection with place that were very meaningful to her. The first was her weekly trip to the Zen Center at Green Gulch, in Marin County, California. As she described it,

I had started going every Sunday to Green Gulch…and that place, and the walk, we used to park at Muir Beach and walk the mile up the valley as part of…Sunday morning ritual before going to the meditation, and then the questions and answers period, and then staying for lunch, and then walking back down the valley. So it was like a Sunday Sabbath ritual that, probably, I did that for 15 or 20 years.”

Carole also mentioned her annual pilgrimage to the Island of Iona, “her special place” that continues to be a source of re-birth, healing, enchantment, learning, and coherence for her.

These six themes that emerged from participants’ stories of powerful experiences of place revealed the context, conditions, feelings, thoughts, and associations with their experiences in time and place. The next section will discuss Part 2 of the data analysis, which is focused on the types of experiences and their dimensions.
Part 2: Shaping of One’s Sense of Self

For Part 2 of the data analysis, I was reviewing the second master list that I had compiled, and again reflected on Finlay and Evan’s four interlinking dimensions of the Relational Approach. The list for Part 2 was divided into three types of experiences, based on whether they were formative, informative, or transformative to the person’s sense of self. Each of these categories were then broken down further to examine the types of powerful experiences, based on five dimensions: peak, plateau, and nadir experiences, epiphanies, and liminal states. Table C1 in Appendix C shows this breakdown.

Then I considered thoughtfully each person, their experiences, their life story, and the larger essence of who I sensed they were, are, or might become. I also thought about their collective experiences and the six themes that emerged through the telling of their stories. I wondered if there was a further relationship between the where, the when, and the what of their experience and how that may have impacted participants’ sense of self. Where (in what place) did the experience occur? How did the location or place contribute to the experience? Did place enable it? Or, was place a backdrop? Or, was it a co-affecting dynamic? What about the place catalyzed the experience? When in their lifespan did their forming, informing, or transforming experience occur? What dimension(s)—peak, plateau, nadir, epiphany, or liminal—of the experience was elicited? Was there a relationship between where the experience occurred, when in the lifespan, and the dimension of the experience? And finally, with respect to how the person’s sense of self was influenced or shaped, how did the participant choose to interpret and frame the experience in the context of all these variables, and why? How, if at all, were these factors interrelated?
**Forming experiences.** All participants shared stories of formative experiences of place that revealed their particular responses to specific environmental conditions, which then played a role in their relationships with future places and their identity development. Formative experiences of place are especially important because it is in childhood when one develops working models of the self in context. In a process similar to how attachment happens between a child and a primary caretaker, place-attachment and place-identity are thought to emerge in a similar dynamic. The longer-term effects of place attachment and place identity on sense of self will be further considered in the discussion section. In total, there were 15 stories that fit into this category. Formative experiences were associated with peak (6.75), liminal (5.25), nadir (2), and plateau (1) experiences. One story fit into two types, which was a combination of peak and liminal states, as indicated by the decimals (see Appendix B, Table B1).

Participants’ formative powerful experiences of place varied in their descriptions in terms of their connection with a formative childhood place, and they tended to be in one of two groups. The first group, half the participants (4), had a very strong positive attachment to a particular locale. In these four cases, the person’s sense of self was to varying degrees, either fused with that place or its key characteristics.

In the second group, a sense of attachment to a formative childhood place was either associated with (a) somewhat negative attributes of the place or situation, so a secure place attachment did not occur; (b) the bond was sufficiently weak that influencing factors were less potent for integration into their identity; or (c) a bond was formed, but it was not at the exclusion of the formation of other equally strong attachments, which for some participants turned out to be a be different kind of place than the participants’ first place-identity. How the participants thought about and described their experiences, including the place(s), the situation(s),
themselves, or their feelings—the overall gestalt that they portrayed from their memory—contributed to how I chose to interpret their story and place them into one group or another. Two stories were selected for inclusion and clarity.

Ralph’s story represents the first group with a strong positive attachment to place. Ralph’s very “personal and powerful” bond with his family farm in North Carolina could be described as essential and seminal to his very being. Over the course of his life, the farm has served as a strong anchor and “center” for him. Ralph spoke with great affection about the farm, noting a joyful history and enduring values connected with it. Ralph described his relationship with the farm thus:

Now in retrospect, I can see that the values that the place inculcated are just fundamental to me. In many, many ways, there is just no separation between my skin and that dirt. My relationship with that place, I think is good for that place…the whole time I was away…I knew that that was the center of the world, that going back to [the farm] gave me some centering that was fundamental to my health, and certainly fundamental to my genuine identity.

Ralph continued,

There were so many of these values that the land and the culture represented, that I just embraced them…those kind of moments in the landscape, it just got etched into my brain, and then my heart, and into my bones. Every time…I go to that field, it calls up my own identity of being a fighter of prejudice, and a champion of the marginalized, or the discriminated against, it also calls up my own identity of being able to work incredibly hard…and to maintain focus, and to endure…

Ralph’s sense of self was clearly and profoundly shaped by his relationship with the family farm, and the values the place inculcated in him. His place-identity has left a lasting impression across his life story. Ralph chose a career path that combined his attachment to land (landscape architecture) with community development and social activism, the latter of which was an outgrowth of the prejudice and inequality he observed on the farm, which deeply disturbed him. These values were derived from his formative experiences of place. Ralph’s
legacy is his work as an environmental educator, community design facilitator, preservationist, social activist, cross-cultural bridge-builder, and place-maker.

Representing the second group, Gina exemplified subcategory (a), where her sense of attachment to a formative childhood place was associated with somewhat negative attributes of the situation or place. Gina described her childhood and family situation in Germany this way:

I was not a very happy teenager in my family. I had also some depression. I had an eating disorder. I was not happy. I was the youngest of five so there were a lot of circumstances in my family…with some tricky things that happened to people.

As previously noted, Gina also felt that the creative, expressive, and alive parts of herself were unseen and unsupported in Germany, and the path of her life seemed limited and predetermined. She also felt that some of the fundamental cultural characteristics of Germany did not resonate with her. Gina continued,

In Germany, I also find it almost uptight or anal-retentive…when the cultural norm is like unless you groom your pavement in front of your house once a week, you are not a good neighbor…when the cultural norm is oppressive around what you care for looks like…it becomes a debilitating normal on creativity. To me the German culture is quite oppressive, stifling.

Gina found she ultimately preferred a more relax, potentially messy, but also cared for home in California, where “there is much more freedom.” Similar to how she described a natural, original forest, she said, “I can breathe here. It feels good. I don’t feel like I am crushed by this domesticated, over domestication.” Gina recognized that her formative experiences of place in her home in Germany were dissonant with her sense of self, causing her to want flee or escape the situation.

Formative experiences ranged along a continuum from peak and plateau to liminal and nadir experiences. Formative peak and plateau experiences led to positive, affective bonds, and associations with a place, wherein the participant adopted a place-identity that included characteristics or values from that place. Liminal experiences were described as temporary
periods of ambiguity, uncertainty, or instability, leading to a variety of positive and negative feelings associated with impermanence. Nadir experiences led to dissonance or even trauma, causing participants to leave, escape, and/or want to resolve the situation.

**Informing experiences.** Beyond one’s formative experiences of place, as one develops, one’s sense of self can be said to be *informed* through adapting and evolving to a myriad of circumstances and environments. With respect to informing experiences, all participants shared stories of change and becoming, either over the course of a single change journey, or looking back across the whole life cycle. In total, there were 14 stories that fit into this category. Informing experiences were associated with liminal (6.75), peak (4.25), epiphany (2), and plateau (1) experiences. One story fit into two types, which was a combination of peak and liminal states (see Appendix B, Table B1).

Bart’s story was representative of his own as well as others’ powerful experiences of place that informed the shaping of his sense of self. His story is a mix of formative and informing environmental influences. Bart had two formative and four informing powerful experiences that he spoke about. To some extent, he fit into category (c) in the formative group, where a bond with place was formed, and in Bart’s case it was with Pittsburgh and the Adirondacks, but it was not at the exclusion of other strong place attachments. Because Bart lived in many places and moved around a lot during his formative and informing years, his identity may have become conflated with more universal characteristics or qualities, which he picked up from and valued from several of his formative and informing place experiences. In essence, he appears to have formed a kind of collage identity over time, including and transcending places and selves in an ongoing evolutionary process. What has emerged from that is Bart’s current identity and self, which he expresses through his work in the world. His sense of
self involves being a bridge across cultures and diverse stakeholders, and getting “out of the world of dualism, and reconciling complexity…spiritualizing the material.”” He continued,

How do you actually work in the world and develop through that process of working in the world, which requires…a recognition that personal development is key to doing this work…we’re seeing ourselves and developing our own capacity to transform and be self-aware…self-observing we call it. Self-observing and self-remembering. How do you be self-observed and take stock of who we are and who we want to be? How do we consciously evolve? If I was not doing that, I could not be doing this work.

Bart’s work in the world is being a place-sourced, whole-systems oriented, change agent and bridge for community regeneration. That work inherently requires ongoing personal development as an expression of all co-affecting and co-evolving living systems. Bart’s powerful experiences of place might thus be understood as bridging the forming, informing, and transforming stages of the self across the lifespan.

Max also shared an informing story that shaped his sense of self in terms of how he was able to bring together different professional and personal parts of himself through his unique combination of talents. In a locale not far from Georgian Bay, Max described the story of a calling or invitation to play the piano in accompaniment to an anticipated storm. Max shared in vivid detail how he could feel the tension building up in the air, the subtle vibration in nearby rocks, and the “strong impulses that were coming from lightning strikes and thunder.” As the storm moved on, he described a “marvelous moment of freshness and stillness.” He then went on to explain how that accompanying unfolding of playing the piano with the storm in that setting shared similarities with what occurs for him when he plays for a conference or in a learning environment. Max intuitively brought the place-based inspiration from the storm in the lodge to an alternate location—that of a conference hall. Combining his musical artistry with his organizational facilitation work, Max allowed the two settings and situations to inform each other, with “the music becom[ing] an active partner in this unfoldment.” With time, this kind of
synchronicity and emergence became more frequent occurrences for Max, and he began having a greater sense of trust in how powerful experiences of place could be a source of inspiration for his evolving sense of self.

**Transforming experiences.** All participants shared experiences that they indicated were transformative to them in small and large ways. In total, there were 16 stories that fit into this category. Transformative experiences were associated with liminal (5), peak (4), epiphany (3), nadir (2.5), and plateau experiences (2) as shown in Appendix B, Table B1. Two stories fit into two types, one was a combination of nadir and liminal states, the other was liminal and plateau. All participants had fascinating stories of personal transformation, and three examples bear mentioning.

An account by Carole worth noting concerns her relationship with the island of Iona in Scotland, and thereby, her relationship with her sense of self. Carole shared her story of spending time in the “transformative landscape” of Iona. Describing her experience there as “magical,” Carole came to know Iona as a source of inspiration, as a wise and loving friend, and as a trusted place that enabled her to re-connect with her past and the many parts of herself. On Iona, the rugged landscapes soothed her soul, and transported her on an inner journey to wholeness. There, and in spending time alone, in quiet reflection, and in nature, Carole was able to revisit past sorrows and conflicts, explore aspects of her shadow, and deconstruct her dreams into meaningful self-understanding. Through the process of personal transformation on Iona, Carole was also healed from cancer, and she found her “healing landscape,” to which she now makes annual pilgrimages.

The thread across Gary’s life story has included many transformative powerful experiences of place. These shaped his sense of self such that he concomitantly experienced a
sense of instability from frequent moving, but he also learned to both maintain self-consistency and change as a response to the need for adaptation. In some cases, this required radical change to different environments and situations. Gary’s transformative experiences of places included a mix of positive (peak, plateau, and liminal) and negative (nadir and liminal) experiences and memories. Two of Gary’s four transformative experiences occurred in his formative years. The emotional tone of his overall recollection was bittersweet. Gary’s stories showed a pattern of places and situations that swung between isolation and socialization, depending on the environment and his response to it. The impact of this instability and volatility on his sense of self may best be described through his own words:

I’m torn between…well, I think there’s always this underlying tension in my life, where I think there’s part of me that wants to go back to that commune-like experience, and have the freedom and be involved in nature, and be more in touch with the present. But then there’s this other tension of achievement, and living in a society of competition, and the financial security…that is always sort of knocking up against each other my entire life.

Having lived in diverse rural, urban, and suburban places, and in first world and third world conditions, Gary has by now adopted, discarded, and modified multiple place-identities. He offered a supplemental view on how this diversity of places and people have influenced his sense of self and values. He said,

I do think I have liked, and now enjoy, being exposed to many different people from other places….I’ve formed a greater awareness of all these different variations of life and appreciation for different ways in which people live….It’s a form of greater awareness of all these parallel universes, which are huge. And unless you’ve dropped into those, you’re just never going to really know about them….And you’re also going to appreciate them more, and you’re going to respect them.

Gary’s greater appreciation for difference amidst all his diverse experiences could be understood as a reflection of his own integration work. This could be revealing his efforts to come to terms with the many facets of himself, all the places wherein he has felt like an insider and outsider, and the meanings he ascribed to those experiences of place.
Gary is in a liminal place about his sense of self at this time. He is not sure what place will call to him next that will feel resonant with the now many facets of himself. It is a fertile time, an in-between-time, as he, and his many selves, make their way through another one of his hero’s journeys. Several other participants also expressed being in a period of transition, change, or indecision in their lives at this time, and one participant even spoke of being in a state of permanent liminality.

Ralph spoke of personal transformation through his shift from being anti-religious to becoming spiritual, especially thought the influence and the importance of sacred places. He said,

“Working in Asia transformed me from being anti-religious to embracing it….There are places in Taiwan, places in Japan, that I completely associate with that transformation. Mount Kurama, outside of Kyoto, Wongchon Village…the crypt where Uncle Gao Ong’s ashes are kept….In another village, in Genschichow, there is a little shrine out in the Wetland…I would go to that shrine, and acknowledge the people who are somehow dispossessed in the world….Anyway, those kinds of connections, those have transformed me. Actually, going to Ryoan-ji, the raked sand garden, which is in Kyoto, almost every time I go it makes me cry. Those places have meaning; they were sacred. They are [sacred].

Ralph’s introduction to “Daoism, and Buddhism, and Shintoism in daily life” made him realize, as he said, that “there was something extraordinarily appealing to me about how religion…[is] still place-based in Japan, and certainly in Taiwan.”

Ralph further described how growing up “in a very benign Methodist religion,” his early church experiences were “sort of like a social club. There were some really good moral values, but there wasn’t this kind of, ‘You’re going to hell’ perspective. He said he never believed in the Virgin Mary, because that just did not make sense to him, and he confirmed in that context, “I didn’t believe intuitively.” However, once he was in Asia, and he became exposed to Buddhism “not as an American translation,” but in daily life, that transformed his view of religion and spirituality.
Ralph explained that on his way home from teaching at Kyoto University, he would regularly walk by a Buddhist temple. There, he would not go into the temple; rather, he would ring the bell outside “to get to God, to be sure that God is listening to you.” Ralph contrasted religion in Asia, where “it hasn’t been sanitized from the landscape,” with “what happened with American religion—it was transported here from other places, and by the time it got transported, it had lost all relationship to, direct relationship, to pagan attachment to place.” Ralph described both peak and plateau experiences in sacred places, and he made it clear that his direct relationship with sacred places touched him fundamentally.

Ralph went on to explain that as a direct result of his time in Asia, he began to bring prayer and spirituality into his landscape architecture classes. He did that despite it being taboo to do so, noting that at that time, you just could not “talk about religion or [my] religious beliefs at Berkeley, it was just so unfashionable.” In keeping with his authentic self, Ralph’s acknowledgment of the importance of sacred places in his life, even when it was a risk to do so, supported him in deepening his sense of self through his spirituality. Ralph’s story highlights how powerful experiences of place can shape one’s sense of self.

Almost all participants touched on the role of spirituality in the evolution of their sense of self, and most connected their transformation with powerful experiences of place. For some, spirituality has become an active awareness in their daily lives, sometimes involving a ritual or ceremony. An enhanced recognition of sacred spaces and places has for those participants served as an important entry into mystical and spiritual realms. The topic of spirituality among most participants is a pattern that will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
Summary

This chapter provided a presentation and analysis of the data obtained and a review of the study’s main findings. The chapter began with an introduction and brief summary of and rationale for how the data were organized and explicated. The goals and objectives of the study were reviewed in order to reflect on how the findings were connected to the study’s objectives. Answering the question, “How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self,” the analysis was divided into two parts.

In Part 1, the data analysis began with a descriptive background for each of the study participants, all of whom were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. I then examined participants’ powerful experiences of place, reducing the essences to six themes that emerged from the data. Examples from participants’ stories were woven into the themes. The six themes were (a) natural elements and geography, (b) community, roots, and belonging, (c) aliveness, wholeness, and the cycle of life, (d) freedom, adventure, and escape, (e) possibility, becoming, liminality, and the unknown, and (f) enchantment, the sacred, and coherence.

In Part 2, I analyzed participants’ stories by dividing them into three types—formative, informing, and transformative experiences—to get a sense of when the experience occurred in participants’ lifespan. This was linked with their development and evolution of their sense of self. I then further categorized the types of experiences and reduced the types of experiences into dimensions of powerful experiences, which related to how participants described their subjective experience and the further effect on their sense of self. The five dimensions were peak, plateau, nadir, epiphany, and liminal states.

Further analysis and synthesis on how the data in Part 1 and Part 2 relate to each other, as well as other patterns that emerged from further reflection, is the topic of the next chapter. In
Chapter 5, the findings from the study are interpreted, discussed, and further considered in light of the results and existing literature. Implications for future research, a conclusion of the study’s findings, and final reflections are also provided.
CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This final chapter of the dissertation includes a synthesis, interpretation, and discussion of the study findings. The following key areas will be addressed: (a) emergent patterns, themes, or connections running through the data; (b) the findings in relation to the existing literature; (c) the findings in relation to the two parts of the primary research questions, and how the two parts are connected; (d) limitation of the study; and (e) the implications of this work and suggestions for future research. This chapter concludes the dissertation with final reflections, insights, and inspiration that emerged in the research process.

Patterns and Connections Across the Findings

It bears mentioning that the themes, patterns, and connections that emerged from the findings in this study were enmeshed and entangled amongst each other, with loose and overlapping boundaries. In keeping with the methodological choice of The Relational Approach, the entwined complexity of the findings mirrors an elaborate, intricately woven, handmade fabric. As such, the findings are interlaced with dichotomies and incongruity. That said, I created different conceptual categories and structures of analysis to enable a more robust understanding of participants’ experiences, which in turn, better answers the research questions in this inquiry. Therefore, the patterns and meta themes that emerged from the themes and dimensions explored in the previous chapter constitute the multiple threads that woven together create the rich tapestry of experiences.

A deeper analysis of the six themes that emerged from the data described in Chapter 4 led to a new level of interpretation of the findings. The six themes previously mentioned were (a) natural elements and geography, (b) community, roots, and belonging, (c) aliveness, wholeness, and the cycle of life, (d) freedom, adventure, and escape, (e) possibility, becoming, liminality,
and the unknown, and (f) enchantment, the sacred, and coherence. The deeper analysis resulted
in three meta themes—The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present. Together, the
three meta themes form one pattern, which I am referring to as “the opposing tension of forces.”
Three additional distinct patterns also surfaced. The three additional patterns also relate to and
are present in the meta themes, but because they are distinct enough and deserve additional
attention, they will be described and discussed separately in turn.

Opposing Tension of Forces

The first pattern I noted was that over the course of their lives, participants naturally had
periods of stability and other times of change. In terms of their relationship with place, these
opposing (and complementary) forces manifested as a tension of polarities along a continuum.
On one side, participants stayed put in a particular location, secure, resting, and venturing little
from the known. On the other side of the continuum was the unknown, in which they moved
around, were highly mobile in some way, seeking, adventuring, or questing through new work
opportunities, travel, or for other reasons, some of which may not have been elective. Within
themselves, this tension similarly represented their maintaining “the known” of their sense of self
through self-consistency, congruence, and continuity. On the other side of the continuum, “the
unknown” manifested in their making changes in themselves, in their trying out new versions
and visions of possible selves, and in their improvisation and re-evaluation of who they might
become. There were many examples of balancing tensions, both concrete and metaphoric.
Concrete examples included place and space, and safety and risk, and more abstract tensions
included permanence and impermanence. Figure 1 shows examples of these opposing tensions.
Figure 1. Tensions the self holds as it negotiates and balances change across time.
The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present. I am referring to the three meta-themes within the pattern of opposing tensions as The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present. The meta-theme of The Known is comprised of theme A, which included natural elements and geography, and theme B, which included community, roots, and belonging. The Known includes tangible characteristics such as mountains, valleys, gardens, wildlife, and coastline, as well as intangible qualities such as community, roots, and belonging. Other descriptors for this meta-theme centered around stability, safety, security, human connection, history, attachment, love, generational memories, wisdom of place, home, haven, and inclusion. An emphasis on the past, the enduring, and the predictable generally defines the meta-theme of The Known.

The second meta-theme, The Unknown, was comprised of themes D and E, which emphasized unpredictable and unstable characteristics. Theme D, entitled freedom, adventure, and escape, included additional descriptors such as independence, exploration, discovery, mobility, and various forms of escape. Theme E, entitled possibility, becoming, liminality, and the unknown, included descriptors such as possibility, imagination, creative emergence, improvisation, healing imagery, becoming, liminality, dreaming, testing, and overcoming. An emphasis on the future, the possible, and the imaginative generally exemplify the characteristics of the meta-theme of The Unknown.

The third meta-theme, The Balancing Present, was generally comprised of themes C and F. Theme C, entitled wholeness, cycle of life, and aliveness, was a large group that included the senses and different forms of energy, such as flow and resonance. The senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch—and balance were part of this theme. Other descriptors were well-being, balance, harmony, peace, joy, rejuvenation, renewal, sustaining, restoration, regeneration, and
thriving. Theme F, entitled enchantment, the sacred, and coherence, brought further intangibles to the meta-theme of The Balancing Present. Theme F included descriptors such as synchronicity, beauty, awe, divine intervention, heightened awareness, elemental, coherence, and unity. These characteristics are balancing and centering. An emphasis on the present, wholeness, and being in the flow of life generally exemplify the characteristics of the third meta-theme, The Balancing Present.

Together, the three meta-themes offer a map of the wholeness of life and the necessary give and take of balancing diverse needs within the self. Balancing The Known—safety, rootedness, stability, and familiarity with The Unknown—the drive for discovery, journeying, emergence, and growth, the self engages in a process of negotiating and reconciling old and new selves. Between The Known and The Unknown, one’s identity balances an equilibrium of these forces through an awareness of the present needs of the self, activating The Balancing Present. Through powerful experiences of place, one’s self is intermittently engaged in an ongoing balancing of opposing and complementary forces that together form, inform, and transform the shape of one’s identity. In the discussion section, I will delve more deeply into this pattern by applying four principles from Breakwell’s Identity Process Theory. Figure 2 shows an evolution of Figure 1 into three meta-themes of The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present.
Figure 2. Identity change amidst The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present
Seeking Similar Formative Place Experiences

A second pattern that emerged from the data was related to participants’ formative and, subsequently, later powerful place experiences. Half of the participants (Carole, Ralph, Max, and John) experienced a strong positive attachment with a particular formative locale or type of place, whereas the other half (Diana, Bart, Gina, and Gary) had place bonds that were either weak, non-existent, or non-exclusive. Looking across time at individual participants’ subsequent powerful experiences of place, I noted that those who had a strong, positive, formative attachment with place sought out bonds with future places that had similar characteristics and that then generated similar experiences for them. Those who did not have an initially strong attachment to place also re-created similar experiences to their original, albeit weaker connection with place. The re-creation led them to re-experience their previously familiar place relationship in a future place and time. These two types of experiences were likely the result of different working models of formative place ties, based on participants’ formative experiences of place. Other factors that may have contributed to this pattern included the strength or weakness of the formative place bond, sensory and emotional versus cognitive processing of the experience, implicit versus explicit memory recall, and participants’ sense of security and emotional regulation with place.

Variations in Dimensions Across the Lifespan

A third pattern pertained to the dimensions and nuances of experiences and when they occurred in the lifespan. Of interest was a higher number of reported peak experiences that occurred during the formative years. Why was this so? I also noted that over the lifetime, peak experiences tended to decrease. One third of the total number of reported stories (15 out of 45) were peak experiences. In addition, and by contrast, plateau experiences (total number reported
was 3.5) and especially epiphanies (total number reported was 5) increased with time. Liminal experiences were notable in the formative years, highest in the informing stage, and still remained prominent in the transformative stage (total number reported was 11.75). Finally, nadir experiences were reported in the formative stage and appeared again later as transformative in three stories (total number reported was 4.5). The total number of stories within each dimension, when they occurred in the lifespan, and their increasing and decreasing frequency over time, were patterns I noticed and then considered how they might be accounted for.

**Felt-Sense of Coherence and Spirituality**

A fourth pattern that recurred was that all participants experienced a connection with an energetic current or force field, which participants described as a felt-sense or resonance with themselves and the larger universe. This energetic theme carried across all the stories, touching on synchronicity, the sacred, enchantment, transcendence, and a sense of coherence. Not all participants were able to clearly articulate or describe the presence of this energetic field, but they spoke of the transformative impact on their sense of self and a subsequent enhanced appreciation for spirituality. For some participants, this phenomenological heightened awareness resulted in a spiritual practice becoming an active part in their daily lives, sometimes involving ritual or ceremony. An enhanced recognition of sacred spaces, places, and emotional and sensing fields has, in different manifestations in those participants, served as an important entry into the more mystical and spiritual realms. For some participants (Carole, Diana, Ralph, Max, and Gina) these practices have been valuable reminders of the importance of spirituality in their lives. The cultivation of spirituality led to a greater sense of coherence, well-being, sense of continuity, and a connection with more enduring and universal wholes.
Discussion

Research Questions and Findings in Light of the Literature

The primary research question posed in this study was: How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self?

Having collected in-depth descriptions and accounts of participants’ experiences, the data collected provided sensory, visceral, emotional, cognitive, cultural, metaphysical, social, and relational characteristics of their experiences. Further elaboration from participants on the details and subtleties of their recollections provided data for answering the sub-questions, which inquired into how those experiences may have shaped participants’ sense of self and identity.

The sub-questions were:

1. How do powerful experiences of place contribute to the formation of one’s sense of self?

2. How do powerful experiences of place inform the ongoing development of one’s sense of self?

3. How do powerful experiences of place transform one’s sense of self?

Opposing Tensions. The first pattern that emerged from a synthesis of the six themes in the initial data analysis uncovered a dynamic of three forces—two are complementary or opposing and one is balancing, which I am calling The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present.

Reflecting on each person’s individual experiences, and then their life story across time, all participants cycled through multiple iterations of the developmental process that the tension of forces reveals. At different times and stages, one or the other polarity became more prominent, suggesting an ongoing balancing and complementarity between the two polarities, across stages and phases and over the life course. Although each person shared a variety of types of powerful
experiences of place, overall they tended to have a preference or leaning toward one side of the continuum or the other, toward The Known or The Unknown, in terms of how and where they lived their life and how that contributed to their sense of self. The ways in which the pattern of opposing tensions revealed itself across three participants’ lives will next be considered.

**The Known.** Ralph leaned more toward The Known. Even though he travelled internationally, lived in different locations, and certainly possessed attributes that were important aspects of his sense of self and descriptive of The Unknown, his stories showed personal preferences that overall resonated more closely with The Known. Ralph’s formative attachment with his family farm, his roots, the history of the land, the sense of security and stability that the place engendered, and his strong sense of belonging to that place exemplify his preference for The Known. Ralph also pursued work in community design and development, which supported his values for a very strong sense of The Known through place advocacy and inclusive community practices. He was more recently engaged in the restoration and preservation of a particular building of historical significance and personal meaning to him, which is located next to the family farm. All told, Ralph’s formative place attachments left an indelible mark on his identity and a strong appreciation for The Known.

Ralph’s stable base gave him an important anchor for his sense of self in the world. Although he traveled considerably, and he even went to live in California for several decades, he ultimately returned to the farm because of a strong pull of the power of that place on his psyche. Ralph had an unequivocal sense that the farm was a part of himself and thus his true home. Now in his mid-70s, Ralph returned to the farm (living there part time) because it is where he intends to live out his days.
As a complement to Ralph’s preference for The Known, is important to note that his powerful experiences of place included both The Known and The Unknown. Embedded within his primary identity of The Known, Ralph also possesses qualities of The Unknown, which both complement and act as a foil to his more externally dominant identity. Ralph’s Unknown characteristics include a very strong sense of striving and overcoming, and a willingness to endure considerable discomfort in pursuit of what matters to him. These attributes were directly related to his formative experiences at the farm picking tobacco in the hot sun, straining his back, and working with Shorty Lawson.

Another of Ralph’s characteristics that fits within The Unknown is his willingness to make waves, question the status quo, and test social norms for the sake of his higher agenda of equality and social justice. A bit of a provocateur, Ralph’s challenging nature invokes The Unknown. Inferring that he lacks a kind of diplomatic polish, Ralph acknowledged that he fit in well with farmers, fisherman, and individuals who, in my interpretation, fit the description of “salt of the earth” (The Known). In an interesting complementarity of The Known and The Unknown, Ralph has applied his classical education and design skills to act as a bridge and advocate for the underprivileged, the marginalized, and the misunderstood. Ralph’s current project entails bringing these skills to the town of Durham, North Carolina, where he resides part time, within a short distance of the family farm. Significantly, Ralph’s values and personal characteristics, both The Known and The Unknown, are all, by his own confirmation, attributable to his formative years on the family farm and the values that place inculcated within him.

The Balancing Present. Max was an interesting mix between The Known and The Unknown. Now living in the area where he has been settled for the past thirty years, upon first
glance, Max appeared to have a preference for The Known. After all, he primarily remained close to Georgian Bay and his early inspirations there, which is just one of many indications of his strong values for roots, history, and community building. If I were to assess Max’s preferences on these more obvious ties at this snapshot in his story, his preference for The Known would be probable. However, delving more deeply into the whole of Max and his story across time serves to reveal a greater complexity and paradox present within him and all of the participants and the pattern of opposing tensions.

Max did have an important period of time when he was completely untethered before settling more permanently into his present home. Prior to that however, he was feeling bound by his seemingly unending full schedule and event driven life. Max envisioned the possibility of living from a spirit free of agendas, goals, or motives, the same spirit that inspired his creative expression with the piano. That spirit was brought forth by time, space, and silence. Max longed for an experience that was akin to what Jones (1995) described as “a space of free and open attention, of infinite possibility, where anything can happen” (p. 164).

With the suggestion of that intention, shortly thereafter Max’s life changed. One sunny summer day, in a catalytic threshold moment of pristine stillness by a lake, Max took a metaphoric plunge. From the ordered known place of his life humming along, he (and his wife) dreamed into what might be next. In short order and a subsequently abrupt flurry of activity, their house was sold, and the artifacts of their old life and selves were boxed up and stored. Heeding a call intimating the start of a hero’s journey, Max and his wife proceeded to dismantle the fundamental structure and foundation of their lives, “heading off with no particular plan” and entering into The Unknown.
No Hero’s Journey proceeds without high stakes and the risk of loss—that is part of the experience of The Unknown. Traveling around North America by van with no agenda, Max was free to wander, wonder, and be. He felt the loss of his former life. His previous identities, activities, and accomplishments fell away. Without any moorings or anchors, he also felt lost. Max explained that he had been looking for “a spiritual home. And it wasn’t where we were. Somehow our fantasies were that it was out there, somewhere. We would just drive into a community and say ‘Ah, this is it. This home.’ But that never happened.” Jones (1995) similarly described this place of The Unknown and his learning from the experience. Jones described that experience this way:

[With] nothing to cling to, not even a tree…and by setting aside, even for an instant, a certain future for an outrageous present…the past and the future enfold into a larger present….Beneath it all, I can trust that no matter in what form my actions flow, if they are warmed by the wishes of my heart, whatever I create along this road will hold. Then I can be assured that the world is a reflection of me, and that everywhere I am, can be called home (pp. 170-172)

With that discovery, and within a year, Max (and his wife) had given up their gypsy life to return to the resplendent fall leaves near their previous “heart” home, and the welcome expected safety and respite of the snowy silence of winter. There, they recognized a resonance, a sense of homecoming, and a sense of belonging. Through that process, Max observed that his music changed. Musical tones that had previously been expressed in the form of notes and chords had shifted. Instead, new arrangements emerged in waves and as soundscapes, an expression of a deeper and more robust knowing of the fullness of his life experiences.

Adding in another layer of complexity to Max and his story, in our conversation he expressed a recent need for change. After thirty years in his current home, once again, Max is sensing a shift in the pendulum. He described his felt-sense of what was emerging for him this time:
We know that there’s…we can feel the energies beginning to intensify, signaling a shift of some form…and I think we’re both in an elder stage in our life…it’s a fertile time…it’s easy to feel lost, and sort of like we are in-between stories….We don’t know whether that’s a physical journey or an imaginative interior one. We’re not quite sure what form it’s taking…I know that work is going to take a different form in the future from what it’s been in the past.

He continued, “There’s a particular palatable energy that’s present in these in-between places. As a pianist, I experience it because I play with both left and right hands. The in-between places are where the music emerges.” Max’s story shows a certain preference for The Known, with the caveat that it was through The Unknown and importantly, The Balancing Present for him to be reawakened to his “own authentic self and be present to [his] own nature, and to [his] own sense of being rooted in place and in home.”

Max’s comfort with The Known could be an important stabilizing factor for his expression as a musician. He noted (pun intended), music arises in the present moment; it is “an experiment” requiring a free, felt-sense, back and forth balancing between the head and the heart. For him, it is through following an impulse from a moment of emptiness, one that arises out of The Balancing Present and The emerging Unknown, that allows for the opening of a channel by which a live current sparks one’s genius that then enables the energy of music to flow.

**The Unknown.** Gina has led a life more closely aligned with The Unknown. Leaving her family and home in Germany at 17 for North America, Gina’s history and more primary characteristics could be described as the following: independent, free, adventuresome, explorer, on the edge, testing, mobile, becoming, and in a state of semi-permanent liminality. Gina’s primary identity lives in The Unknown. Across her stories, she spoke of “living in the margins…at the edge.” She also shared her love for places that are remote, untouched, pristine, and alive, and how they connect her with her “edge place.” She recounted an “overwhelming
experience, powerful and beautiful,” in the remote Australian outback and how there, she was able to re-connect with herself.

In her work, one of Gina’s passions is to co-design and co-facilitate training and development in leadership as a sacred practice. Through her work, she is creating “an incredible way for us to step out of the mundane and familiar and step into the unknown, but also to get in touch with the unknown or the more mysterious parts within ourselves.” In the spirit of someone who naturally gravitates toward The Unknown, she also spoke of her research in liminal states, and how that work continues to inform her whole being. As testament to her primary identity, Gina has engaged in her own training and development in New Shamanism, wherein she has had “so many experiences on the edge” that she now serves as a facilitator and bridge between different worlds. In so doing, she is co-creating the conditions for ceremony, ritual, and the recognition of the sacred through the cultivation of altered states, thereby “disrupting our habit of being in the same frame of mind.”

At the same time, Gina also revealed an awareness of an internal counterpoint between her need to be free and the cost of that freedom. She “let go of her open return ticket” back to her old self and life in Germany and stepped into the “golden cage of freedom,” which she then discovered also brought loneliness. In one of her stories she shared her reflections about the notion of *salka*, the Quechua word for undomesticated energy, in which she considered the distinctions and merits between domesticated and undomesticated energy. She spoke of how The Known is embedded in The Unknown when she described a dream of a black puma gently nurturing and suckling its young. She said, “so often, even in my own self, I do not think of the undomesticated or the natural world as being gentle. I think of it as wild, untamed, and dangerous because it is unknown.” Gina’s recognition of the many facets within the larger whole
of the natural world speak to the depth and richness embedded in the pattern of opposing tensions.

These three participants’ stories reflect some of the elements of The Known, The Balancing Present, and The Unknown within them. The polarity and complementarity within this pattern was true for all the participants in this study in varying degrees. The pattern of opposing tensions demonstrates the complexity and paradox within each of us as we navigate the sometimes precarious pendulum of change across the human life course.

Considering the pattern of opposing tensions in light of the literature, it shares similarities with numerous process models of human change, development, and transformation. To some extent, Figure 1 resembles Kurt Lewin’s (1947) Force Field Analysis and its driving and restraining forces of change. Several other conceptually similar models of forces of human change previously mentioned in the literature review bear mentioning. Scharmer’s (2009) Theory U, which proposes a U-shaped cyclical model, proceeds with a shifting from the past (The Known), through presencing (The Balancing Present), to the emerging future (The Unknown). Campbell’s (1949/2008) Hero’s Journey and Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory are also cyclical in nature, moving from complacency and safety (The Known), through a call, separation, or a disorienting dilemma (The Unknown), then going over a threshold to a return and integration of one’s evolving identity and sense of self (The Balancing Present).

**Identity process theory.** Breakwell’s (1986, 1992, 1993, 2010) Identity Process Theory (IPT) is another model from the literature that shares similarities with this pattern. Rooted in social identity theory and identity theory (see Hogg et al., 1995), IPT is applicable to powerful experiences of place because it provides some evidence for the relationship between identity and
As previously noted in the literature review in Chapter 2, Breakwell proposed that sense of self or identity should be conceptualized as a living process dynamically moving through time and developing through social, physical, and other contexts (Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). As in the pattern of opposing tensions, in IPT the self negotiates change through behavioral responses that (a) maintain consistency through identity assimilation and thus are known to the identity, (b) make changes to the self through identity accommodation and are unknown to the identity, and (c) balance the self by changing when necessary, thereby balancing the identity. IPT notes the importance of dynamically situated context for identity construction, continuity, and malleability.

Further, IPT proposes four principles of identity—continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and distinctiveness (Breakwell, 1986, 1993; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), which guide action and support The Known, The Unknown, and Balancing behaviors. Each of these four principles further complement the pattern of opposing tensions to a greater or lesser degree. I have included them here because the four principles are embedded within this pattern, and when reviewing the in-vivo codes from this study’s data analysis, the four principles of IPT emerged. Each of these principles will next be discussed, as they contribute to the richness within the pattern of opposing tensions and to answering the primary research question and the three sub-questions.

Self-continuity and place continuity. The continuity principle is particularly relevant to this study’s findings because continuity of self is enabled through place attachment and place identity, especially in the formative years. Continuity refers to an individual’s sense of “persistent sameness with oneself” (Erikson as cited in Breakwell, 1993, p. 8). Of importance is
the maintenance and recognition of a sense of “coherence and continuity in one’s self-conceptions” (Korpela, 1989, p. 251).

In light of The Known in the pattern of opposing tensions, and with respect to continuity of self in the findings in this study, four of the eight participants had a strong positive attachment with a particular locale or type of place. They exhibited what Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) referred to as “place referent continuity” and “place congruent continuity.” Two of the participants, Ralph and Max, were place-referent in their formative experiences of place; their positive childhood experience of a particular place served as a consistent backdrop, reference point, and center of significance for the self. Both Ralph and Max repeatedly referred back to their primary place of inspiration in our interview, linking their different experiences across their lives to their first powerful formative place-identity, indicating it was an anchor to their essential being and within our conversation.

The other two participants, Carole and John, exhibited place-congruent continuity. For them, their sense of continuity in their self-conceptions was linked with particular attributes or essential characteristics of places. Place-congruent continuity characteristics are transferable by the self from one place to another. For example, one could have a preference for places or settings that have particular natural attributes, or preferred social norms; place-congruent continuity is maintained through the adoption of those preferred values. Place-congruence is values based, which is transferable (P. Morgan, 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

With respect to place-congruent continuity, Carole and John each valued different kinds of natural environments, which were sourced in their early childhood place experiences. Over the course of their lives, both Carole and John have actively immersed themselves in natural settings and activities, and both of them recognized this ongoing thread of the importance of nature in
their lives, which became a prominent aspect of their identities. For Carole, this manifested in a career choice studying the relationship between people and places, and—later in work—exploring the power of therapeutic healing landscapes. For John, his early childhood experiences in “hot rocks and cold water” gave way to a very active lifestyle of climbing, exploring, and testing his limits in the great outdoors. A strong part of John’s identity is his athleticism, physical fitness, and healthy endurance.

It is also worth noting how a version of place-congruent continuity manifested in the other four participants. Bart, Gary, Gina, and Diana all mentioned aspects of formative locations they valued, which they later sought out, either consciously or unconsciously, to a greater or lesser degree. Their place-congruent continuity was different from Carole’s and John’s, however, in that it was sourced in multiple locations as opposed to one prominent type of place. For example, Bart described particular physical characteristics that he valued about some places, such as areas that felt nestling, encompassing, and protective. Gary described several formative experiences in natural settings, which provided solace, interest, and flow-like states for him, which he later recalled after seeking out a similar natural setting on a trip to the Danube Delta. Gina’s earlier mellifluous experience overlooking a canyon shared similarities with her later descriptions of memorable evocative natural settings.

Whereas Diana’s formative place ties were generally negative and weak, and she never really felt at home in New Jersey or Larchmont, New York, where she grew up, she did mention three aspects of her childhood place experiences that she took with her. Her childhood home had very large rooms, a view onto trees and water and, in her youth, she was actively involved in community service in her town. As it turned out, Diana ended up in New York City with large
rooms, views onto a park and the Hudson River, and she has spent her lifetime involved in community service and activism.

Although the latter four participants did not necessarily have a strong positive bond with one particular place or type of place, they each took with them select meaningful characteristics from their formative place experiences to form a place-identity that was a kind of multicentered place congruence continuity. Lippard (1997), as previously noted in the literature review, used the term “multicentered” to describe a serial sensitivity to multiple places wherein one’s sense of belonging and identity is temporally shaped, but not confined by a single or multiple locations. Place-referent and place-congruent continuity are consistent with the descriptors in The Known, which, among other attributes, includes an emphasis on recognizable characteristics such as natural and enduring landscapes, stability, security, history, community, roots, and belonging, all of which support self-continuity.

*Identity self-esteem.* The second principle of identity in IPT, self-esteem, is concerned with a person’s feelings of self-worth and social value. Individuals will seek to achieve and maintain positive self-esteem and self-conception, and this desire is a basic tenet of every identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995; Myers, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2012; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Self-esteem is associated with specific words such as love and belonging, contribution, collaboration, and inclusion. These are descriptors that are also consistent with The Known in the pattern of opposing tensions, which the self relies on to (re)confirm its self-worth. Self-esteem is also associated with some of the descriptors in The Balancing Present and The Unknown in this pattern; issues of self-esteem were relevant across the whole pattern. Words such as aliveness, wholeness, thriving, well-being, balance, peace, harmony, joy, resonance, and flow were relevant to the principle of self-esteem in the Balancing Present. Descriptors such as escape from self-
limits, self-belief in one’s sense of becoming and ability to learn, and trust in one’s grit to overcome unanticipated challenges were relevant to the principle of self-esteem in the The Unknown.

Identity distinctiveness. The third principle of identity in IPT is distinctiveness. This principle corresponds with the opposing tension pattern through individual’s striving for uniqueness and personal differentiation, not unlike social identification. This principle suggests a push towards difference, but not total distinctiveness (Breakwell, 1993). Distinctiveness could manifest as an identification with a particular setting or genre of place, a travel locale, or unique characteristics that are attributable to a particular area. This principle suggests the use of place identifications as a way of aligning with specific values, or as a means of conveying social status, which can be used as a form of self-mirroring, self-referencing, or identity association (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

Examples of the principle of distinctiveness in this study included participants’ use of words or concepts and such as: exceptionalism, exotic, mysterious, mystical, enchanting, rare, unique, original, extraordinary, ecstatic, remote, wild, pristine, and untouched. These descriptors were relevant across all three meta-themes in the opposing tensions pattern, and especially to The Known Group as they gave a sense of distinctiveness to participants’ descriptions of their powerful experiences of place.

Identity self-efficacy. The fourth principle of identity in ITP is that of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) described self-efficacy as a measure of personal agency wherein an individual believes in their capabilities to meet situational demands. This principle was exemplified most in the opposing tensions pattern through The Unknown. Participants used the following words to describe their experiences, which corresponded to the shaping of their sense of self-efficacy:
discovery, adventure, exploration, escape from self-limits, learning, improvisation, as well as aspiring, testing, bridging, and overcoming.

The Unknown in the opposing tensions pattern reflects individuals’ efforts and willingness to challenge themselves, overcome limiting beliefs, or move toward learning and increased mastery. Specific examples from participants’ stories included overcoming rigorous physical challenges such as healing from cancer (Carole); climbing the peak of a summit (John); traveling to remote or unknown locations without pre-planning (Diana); improvising in a concert hall in front of a group of 500 people (Max); making sense of a profound emotional breakdown and then incorporating the learning into one’s professional expertise by becoming a cross-cultural bridge builder (Bart); moving to a new country with no financial resources and few language skills and finding her way (Gina); bringing spirituality into academia, which was considered taboo (Ralph); and overcoming the difficulties of adapting to new cultures (Gary).

The whole of the pattern of opposing tensions, including The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present, in conjunction with the principles of continuity, self-esteem, distinctiveness, and self-efficacy, offers insight into how the self is shaped by maintaining and changing itself in the context of powerful experiences of place. The pattern of opposing tensions thus contributes to answering the primary research question, “How do powerful experiences of place shape one’s sense of self?” As well, this pattern, in part, answers the three sub-questions, which related to how powerful experiences of place form, inform, and transform one’s sense of self.

Another way to think of the whole of this pattern across time is as a series of pendulum swings. Seamon (1985) similarly described “the rest-movement relationship and its associated
polarities of home and reach, center and horizon, dwelling and journey...[as] one valuable phenomenological focus” (p. 227). He continued,

Movement is associated with newness, unfamiliarity, exploration, and courage. It extends awareness of distance, place and experience. Movement is linked with journey, which over geographical distance or in the mind, carries the person away from a stable home base outward along a path toward confrontation with place, experience, or ideas. Rest, the opposite of movement, relates to a basic human need for spatial and environmental order and familiarity. Rest anchors the present and future in the past and maintains an experiential and historical continuity. From the vantage point of human experience, the deepest manifestation of rest is dwelling, which involves a lifestyle of regularity, repetition, and cyclicity all grounded in an atmosphere of care and concern for places, things, and people...The relationship between dwelling and journey is dialectical and identifies the need for both stability and change....The whole of a person, group, or society’s existence can be viewed as a series of pendulum swings between the need for a center, at-homeness, and continuity on the one hand, and the need for change, variety, and reach on the other. Considered in a temporal sense, the dwelling-journey relationship signifies a process, which occurs over time: the experience of leaving one place and going to another (pp. 227-228)

Seamon’s perspectives corroborate the pattern of opposing tensions and the human needs within The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present for the self to progress in the process of individuation. Through a recursive process of this pattern, participants’ powerful experiences were touchstones that served to form, inform, and transform their sense of self across time and place. Figure 3 shows the pattern of opposing tensions with the addition of four principles embedded within it.
Figure 3. Pattern of Opposing Tensions with the four principles embedded.
**Seeking similar place experiences.** The second pattern that emerged in the findings was related to participants seeking similar formative experiences of place, which manifested in them subsequently re-creating recognizable or familiar experiences of place. What could account for this pattern? A second review of the literature on place attachment and place identity formation revealed five factors: (a) different internal working models of the self, (b) the strength or weakness of the formative place tie, (c) sensory and emotional (and intensity and vividness) versus cognitive processing (and sensory dimming with a focus on cognition), (d) implicit versus explicit memory recall, and (e) sense of security and emotional regulation about place. Each of these will next be discussed with respect to this pattern.

**Internal working models of the self.** Based on Bowlby’s (1969) theory of attachment, childhood attachment to a primary caretaker leads to the development of an internal working model of the self. Bretherton and Munholland (1999) described an internal working model as a cognitive framework of mental representations for making sense of the world, the self, and others. Bowlby (1980) suggested that internal working models are unconscious and enduring psychological structures that form a template for all subsequent social relationships. What about other kinds of relationships, such as those with place? If, as Bowlby suggested, a person’s interactions with others are unconsciously guided by memories and expectations from their internal working model, why would this not also apply to the pattern of seeking similar place experiences? The re-creating or seeking of places and experiences that resemble previous ones could be a way of consciously preserving identity continuity, and the reinforcing of existing working models could create a positive feedback loop. Place-identity theorists Proshansky et al. (1983) would concur that internal working models such as those in the similar places pattern are in alignment with the notion that “the subjective sense of self is defined and expressed not
simply by one’s relationship to other people, but also by one’s relationships to the various physical settings that define and structure day-to-day life” (p. 58). Confirming the seeking similar places pattern, Proshansky et al. (1983) also noted that “in many cases—although by no means in all cases…physical setting experiences are persistent and repetitive over time” (p. 64).

Regarding participants’ formative place attachments in this study, and how that in turn influenced their individual seeking inclinations, four of the eight study participants appeared to have internal working models of place-bonding that enabled strong place attachments and place-identity formation. Of the four, two participants had place-relevant bonds and remained in their place of origin for their childhood duration. The other two participants had place-congruent bonds. One of them stayed in the same location for the duration of their childhood, and the other did not. Both participants exhibited strong positive place-congruent continuity.

The other four participants in the study, for whom childhood place attachment was weaker, also followed the pattern of seeking similar places. These participants sought out later place experiences, which similarly recreated recognizable or familiar experiences of their previous experiences, and for three of the four participants turned out to be a continuation of weaker place ties and considerably more mobility with respect to changing homes and moving. The fourth participant, Diana, ended up staying in one home for over forty years, where she still resides. Despite her long residency, Diana had mixed feelings, both positive and negative, about her home. Consistent with the pattern of seeking similar places, that is also how she felt about her formative place ties.

**Formative place ties.** Following this pattern, participants’ seeking of places and experiences that resemble previous ones are founded on original, formative place attachments and place-identity experiences. How do place ties form? How do those formative ties shape
one’s sense of self? Some theorists suggest place-attachment and place-identity form in middle childhood (Giuliani, 2003; Sobel, 1990), slightly later than the bonds of human attachment, which are thought to occur within the first three years of life. Additionally, the strength or weakness of the bond is important, because an individual’s internal working models of place bonding are conditioned and set by the formative bond’s strength or weakness. This suggests that participants’ formative powerful experiences of place could thereby have been influenced by the strength or weakness of their original place ties. The type of original place bond was then re-created and reinforced, as demonstrated in the pattern of seeking similar places.

The strength of the bond is a notable distinction because powerful experiences of place that occur later in the formative human developmental process are thought to rely on cognitive processing more than sensory (Sebba, 1991). This finding for the seemingly weaker place-affiliated participants is also mostly consistent with the literature. There are two exceptions in this study of vivid descriptions, one by Gina and the other by Gary, both of whom had notable transformative experiences in their early to mid-teens, during their formative years, and both of which were peak experiences. Because their experiences occurred at the adolescent stage of development, these two exceptions could be explained by their use of both sensory and cognitive aspects in their descriptions, which would then be consistent with the existing literature. The issue of the type of memory recall, its correspondence with stage of development, and its impact on later experiences of place will next be discussed, because they are relevant to why participants showed a tendency to seek out experiences similar to those from their formative experiences of place.

Further supporting the pattern of seeking similar places, Cooper Marcus (1992) and Hester and O’Donnell (1987) argued that childhood place experiences played an important
subsequent role in adult identity. In her research, Cooper Marcus (1992) confirmed this pattern, as evidenced by architecture students’ unconsciously recreating designs in their academic coursework that, they later recognized, resembled characteristics and qualities of their own childhood place experiences.

One of the participants in this study recognized and acknowledged the pattern of seeking similar places, both in himself, and in one of his colleagues. Describing his time living in California, Ralph said, “I did the best I could to recreate a small farm in our backyard in Berkeley, and then later, at a house that we owned up in Westport…it was basically a reconstruction of, at a micro-scale, North Carolina.” When Ralph’s landscape architect colleague, Will, came to the recognition of this pattern, Will said, “I know now why my client just hates this plaza I’ve designed for downtown Charlotte.” Ralph then explained further,

      It was an urban plaza, well he was trying to create this swamp that had been so formative for him in upstate New York. It was to the client, who envisioned this very sophisticated urban plaza, this thing seemed like a snake pit that Will was creating, and it was slimy, and it had standing water, and mosquitoes, and snakes.

Ralph continued, “I believe that almost all designers…are inspired and prisoners of our mostly early childhood formative experiences…one is unknowingly embracing those places, like in my case, until I became so self-aware of it.”

Another aspect related to the similar places pattern that was consistent with previous literature was the emotional versus cognitive quality of the individual accounts of participants. Knez (2005, 2014) distinguished between place attachment bonds and place identity bonds, the former being linked to emotional processing with place (especially in early childhood), and the latter being related to a cognitive recognition of place (in adolescence and adulthood) as part of one’s sense of self or identity. The degree of emotional versus cognitive processing with respect to participants’ formative place experiences could have contributed to participants’ preferences
for emotional versus cognitive seeking experiences in this pattern. Knez’s findings could explain why the four positively place-attached participants’ descriptions of powerful experiences of place were vivid, sensory, and emotionally laden. Participants’ positive, early, heightened sensory experiences could also have allowed for a more potent, long-term recollection (Sebba, 1991). Participants’ preferences for more emotional versus cognitive recollections could also account for or contribute to why there was a higher number of peak dimensions in participants’ formative experiences, a consideration that will be discussed shortly, in the third pattern.

The four participants who appeared to have adopted internal working models of place-identity that were generally less subjectively affectionate toward one special genre of place may well have had weaker ties to place. This could have been a result of their having had a more cognitive internal working model of their formative experiences of place. These four participants’ bonds were generally more cognitively descriptive than positively affective about their formative places, and their relationships with those places appear to have been weaker, more tenuous, discontinuous, or undiscernible. Following the pattern of seeking similar places, these same participants’ later place experiences resembled their formative ones.

**Implicit and explicit memory.** Two types of memory recall, implicit and explicit, are thought to contribute to differences in recollections of early childhood versus adult powerful experiences of place (Chawla, 1992; Knez, 2014; P. Morgan, 2010; Sebba, 1991). The four participants in the place attached group appeared to have relied on implicit memory for their descriptions, whereas the other four participants with weaker place ties generally appeared to use explicit memory.

Implicit memory, sometimes referred to as procedural memory, relates to knowing how to do something through the unconscious use of the body. Skills on how to do things are acquired
through practice and repetition; an example would be riding a bike or swimming. Implicit memory is composed of automatic sensorimotor behaviors that are deeply embedded, and once acquired, they become tacit. Implicit memory can be thought of as directed by sensory *body-memory*.

By contract, explicit memory, also called declarative memory, involves conscious, intentional remembering of information of facts and events that are explicitly stored and can be consciously recalled or “declared.” Explicit memory relates to knowing what, which is cognitively sourced. Episodic memory (general facts) and semantic memory (personal facts) are subsets of declarative and explicit memory.

Sebba (1991) and others have linked implicit memory with formative place experiences. Sebba concluded:

There is a connection between the quality of the child’s experience and the way it is engraved in memory as he or she matures: (a) an experience in which the child is actively involved, with his body, his senses, and his awareness, is likely to be etched in memory for a long time; and (b) the sympathetic attitude the child displays toward nature is likely to accompany the experience even when recalled in memory.…The child’s sensory perception remains in adult memory as a central childhood experience because its relative importance is at its peak at this stage of life. (p. 395)

Further, as P. Morgan (2010) noted, a “heightened attentiveness to place in childhood…is more vivid and pleasurable. Consequently, memory of childhood place is fixed in the context of an intense and ecstatic sensory awareness” (p. 12).

The findings in this study and the pattern of seeking similar place experiences were mostly consistent with the results in Sebba’s (1991), Cooper Marcus’s (1992), Hay’s (1998), and P. Morgan’s (2010) research. Participants’ descriptions of formative experiences were indeed vivid, and most were affect laden, suggesting the presence of implicit memory recall in 13 of the 15 formative stories. The effects of implicit memory on formative powerful experiences of place in this study thus mostly corroborated previous research results.
Explicit memory is associated with adolescent, adult, and abstract memory systems (Chawla, 1992; Knez, 2014; P. Morgan, 2010; Sebba, 1991). P. Morgan (2010) indicated, “a developmental shift in early adolescence from the primacy of sensory to cognitive engagement with the world is accompanied by a dimming of sensory perception” (p. 12). In addition, adult accounts of place experiences and attachment tend to highlight more complex meanings and the resulting feelings for a place, as well as an awareness of social, cultural, or other factors that affect the relationship between people and place (Massey, 1994; P. Morgan, 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Findings with respect to participants’ later adolescent and adult story descriptions in this study were consistent with previous research in terms of the overall comparative vividness versus more cognitive recollection of informing and transforming experiences.

It is worth noting that retrospective memory is subject to reconstruction and reinterpretation, casting a degree of doubt on its reliability (Chawla, 1992; Gilbert, 2006; Knez, 2014). In a study comparing adult remembered preferences for childhood outdoor settings and children’s reported experiences of outdoor settings, Sebba (1991) found a marked disjunction between the two. Adult remembrance of such settings were 96% favorable, whereas children’s reports were only 46%, suggesting a positively enhanced retrospective reconstruction (P. Morgan, 2010; Sebba, 1991). This is relevant to the pattern of seeking similar places because participants’ seeking was invariably influenced by the original memory imprint, whether it was a strong bond or not. The adult remembrance was then conceivably later recalled in a more favorable light than the actual original experience. One conclusion from this enhanced retrospective reconstruction is that both strong and weak place attachment and place identity bonds were potentially recalled in a more favorable light. Although enhanced memory
reconstruction brings into question the veracity of participants’ short and longer-term recollections of powerful experiences of place, how participants made meaning from their memories is still relevant to their identity and sense of self over time.

**Sense of security and emotional regulation.** Another aspect that may inform why the similar places pattern might have occurred is related to participants’ sense of security and emotional regulation with place. For the place-referent and place-congruent participants, positive childhood experiences of place allowed for the development of a secure, internal center of calm and stability as adults (Chawla, 1990, 1992; P. Morgan, 2010). Korpela, Kytta, and Hartig (2002) found that children appeared to use their favorite places for restoration and emotion regulation, and Ulrich (1984) and Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) further confirmed the restorative and soothing benefits of natural environments. Korpela and Hartig similarly concluded, “experiences of positive affect in child-environment interactions contribute to identity consolidation (developmental) processes” (as cited in P. Morgan, 2010, p. 19).

Some theorists have suggested that individuals who may not have had otherwise strong attachment bonds with a primary person instead could have attached to a place or type of place. Place for them could otherwise have offered a soothing effect that was somewhat analogous to a human caretaker (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Korpela, 1989; P. Morgan, 2010). It is unclear to what degree participants in this study turned to place in lieu of attachment bonds with a primary person (although Carole indicated her strong formative place-ties did serve that function to a strong degree). It could also be that the bonds between person and place were not mutually exclusive but complementary. For the participants in this study, ascribed place meanings could have occurred anywhere along a continuum from a vital primary caretaker to a mildly supportive one.
Korpela (1992) suggested that “physical settings may be used to protect self-identity” (p. 241). For the four positively place-tied participants, findings in this study suggest that their place-identity served that purpose. Korpela (1992) further confirmed that positive, past place reminders offered a concrete background against which [individuals] were able to judge themselves as they grew older. This presumably created coherence and continuity in their self-conceptions. One implication of this is that extreme variations in physical environment may threaten the self-identity of the person. (p. 244)

Those four participants mentioned at least one place that served as a refuge, source of solace, or inspiration, which they then later either returned to, similarly re-created, or sought out, based on their earlier formed conscious or unconscious working models of self and place-identity.

The other four participants, for whom a formative, positive, and exclusive place-tie did not occur, may have conceived of place as a means of supporting their emergent identity.

Korpela (1992) continued,

It is likely that places may help with the transformation of identity....Because the outcome of the yearned-for transformation may be only dimly intuited, a person may search for places that promise to capture and crystallize the emergent identity. The realization of the transformed self may come about when the individual experiences a sense of recognition when the place which is a true reflection of the identity is found. For some individuals, personal metamorphosis demands withdrawal from everyday life and the purging of everyday attachments. For others, the journey itself may be the process by which the identity transformation is brought to completion. (p. 244)

For those participants, the degree to which a place supported their mobility and exploration was perhaps more important to their present and future-self continuity of their primary identity than the security of their past place-identities.

In both groups of participants, the pattern of seeking similar place experiences was still reconfirmed, because no matter whether their internal sense of security and emotional regulation was best supported by roots or routes, they still tended to seek out similar formative experiences of place. As unique individuals, all participants could be ascribing different meanings to their
place identity. This issue of how places serve to emotionally self-regulate (through a sense of place security) and transform self-identity (through mobility) is an important ongoing area of inquiry in place-identity research. This issue also circles back to how the internal balancing of forces between The Known, The Unknown, and The Balancing Present are emotionally regulated, understood, conceived, and acted upon.

**Variations in dimensions.** A third pattern pertained to the different dimension of participants’ experiences across time. Some dimensions increased in relation to the themes, others decreased, and some stayed roughly the same. I noticed this pattern of changes in dimensions once I created Table C1 (see Appendix C), and reviewed the individual participants’ stories again to get a feel for how each person changed over time through their experiences and in relation to the six themes that emerged in the initial findings. Looking at the overall higher number of peak experiences in the formative years, I wondered why that might be so. Could emotional versus cognitive factors have contributed to a higher number of peak dimensions in formative years, as suggested by the literature in the pattern of seeking similar place experiences?

Indeed, the vividness of participants’ peak experiences could be attributed to a stronger sensory and emotional orientation in the childhood years, prior to when a developmental shift to cognitive sense-making may have occurred. A preference for cognitive processing in the later years could explain a decrease (although small) in reported peak experiences in the middle and later years. The developmental shift from sensory to a cognitive could also account for the dimming of sensory perception and an increase in awareness of other meaningful relational factors between one’s self and place experiences (Massey, 1994; P. Morgan, 2010; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). What about the other four dimensions, some of which increased over
time, others decreased, and some roughly stayed the same? Taken as a whole pattern, what did this reveal, if anything, about participants’ powerful experiences of place across time and their relationship with their sense of self?

How could increases in plateau experiences and especially epiphanies be accounted for? Going back to the literature, one possible explanation with respect to plateau experiences can be traced back to Maslow’s studies in plateau states. Maslow regarded plateau experiences as more reliable and sustained states of serenity (as compared with peak experiences), suggesting that they were more enduring and primarily cognitive. Maslow described the plateau experience as “a witnessing of the world…a witnessing of reality. It involves seeing the symbolic, or the mythic, the poetic, the transcendent, the miraculous, the unbelievable…all of which are part of the real world” (Maslow as cited in Krippner, 1972, p. 115). The result was “a kind of unitive consciousness…the simultaneous perception of the sacred and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the ordinary, or the miraculous and the rather constant or easy-without-effort sort of thing” (Maslow as cited in Krippner, 1972, p. 113).

Two participants described plateau experiences: Gary and Carole. Gary’s was formative and occurred in his teenage years, which can be partially accounted for by an increase in cognition at that stage of development. Carole’s three accounts occurred in her middle and later years. In our conversation, Carole spoke several times of her long time meditation practice, which as a volitional cultivation, could account for an increase in her plateau states as she aged. In her descriptions, Carole used words that related to healing, wholeness, the cycle of life, peace, and renewal, all of which reflect a retrospective maturation, and thus could potentially explain, at least in part, an increase in plateau experiences with time.
Similar to plateau experiences, an increase in epiphanies could be attributed to a maturation from retrospection in participants’ sense of self across time. Miller and C’de Baca (2001) characterized epiphanies as a kind of “quantum change,” which they defined as “a vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring transformation” (p. 4). Although epiphanies can occur at any point in the human lifecycle, participants’ epiphanies in this study occurred in the middle and later years. The literature on epiphanies does not specifically state that they are more or less cognitive; however, participants’ experiences in this study were cognitive in terms of the nature of the illumination and meaning making, thus suggesting that time and maturation may in part have contributed to an increase in epiphanies.

An overall prominence and slight increase in liminal experiences could similarly be attributed to maturation and the recognition that change at different stages in the human lifecycle can be accompanied by confusion, disorientation, and disillusionment. Participants’ powerful experiences of place were catalyzed by new, unfamiliar contexts that, as study participant Gina noted, “allowed them to step out of the mundane and familiar and to step into the unknown, but also get in touch with the unknown or the more mysterious parts within [them]selves.” An increase in nadir experiences could also be attributed to a willingness and interest with age to face a wider range of life experiences toward an integration of the many aspects of one’s self.

An increase in nadir experiences would be consistent with the literature in developmental psychology. Erikson (1982) theorized that as individuals evolve through different life stages, they ordinarily go through some kind of psychosocial disorienting dilemma, crisis, or nadir experience toward the end of each stage, seeking a resolution or sense of integration. In his longitudinal research on sense of place in developmental context, Hay (1998) further confirmed that “progression to the next stage required the successful resolution of the conflict; the negative
quality is not defeated—the positive one instead becomes dominant” (p. 16). Theorists of transformative learning and adult constructive development concur: Mezirow (2000), Dirkx (1997), and Kegan (1994) conceivably attribute an increase in nadir experiences with age as an indication of a transformation of meaning schemes toward greater maturation, wholeness, and integration. A developmental perspective on the role of powerful experiences of place across the life cycle offers a natural segue into the fourth pattern, the topic of which is related to participants’ sense of coherence and spirituality.

**A felt-sense of coherence and spirituality.** This pattern, which ran across the other three patterns, served as an underlying energetic current or force field, and infused this entire study. This energetic theme was present in all of the stories. It touched on a feeling of connection with the self and place together, as a unified field. Synchronicity, enchantment, transcendence, the sacred, and a sense of coherence were all words participants used to describe this essential quality. Not all participants were able to clearly articulate or describe this energetic field, but they spoke of the presence of a felt-sense of resonance within themselves and with the larger universe.

The concept of a felt-sense bears clarifying. I previously described felt-sense experiences as individual, relational, intercultural, embodied, systemic, synchronous, resonant, and emergent sensing and feeling, as part of a social and emotional field. My understanding of a felt-sense includes all of these ideas. I understand felt-sense as an inclusive, transcendent synesthesia—a kind of fusion of the senses, emotions, body, and spirit. It is an overlapping, blending, and intertwining of sensory modalities, combined with emotions and memories, all coalescing into a higher order experience greater than the sum of its parts. A felt sense operates on multiple levels of reality simultaneously, across time and space, synergistically connecting the experiencer with the experienced in a phenomenological confluence of holism. (Stern, 2016a, p. 23)

This description is my interpretation of what participants may have been experiencing with respect to coherence and spirituality. Participants used a variety of words to try to articulate the ephemeral qualities of this pattern. I have synthesized and abbreviated their stories into a
general description: felt-sense spiritual place encounters. These experiences were embodied. Participants experienced a combination of grounded-ness in themselves, calm, and peace, but also—simultaneously—a kind of electricity or pulse of energy coming through them. During these experiences, participants felt a sense of oneness with themselves and the larger world. Participants used words like elemental, unity, resonance, joining, sanctuary, and spirit to describe their encounters.

Some participants described a shift that occurred within them and a subsequent transformation to their sense of self. The shift was described as arising out of an enhanced sensitivity to sensing and emotional fields and a heightened awareness of the present moment. This spiritually felt phenomenon manifested in different expressions among the participants. For some, it was recalled as a sacred “aha moment,” an insight that later served as an important reminder and entry into a stronger connection with themselves and the larger world. For others, it was recalled as a time of peace, grace, and manifesting a higher vision of themselves and the world. Within the self, participants described a deeper sense of appreciation, gratitude, acceptance, healing, and integration among the different aspects of themselves.

An outgrowth of this pattern for some participants was the desire to partake in a regular spiritual practice. Such practices served as intentional structures to support the development of internal shifts, self-trust, and flow-states. Spiritual practices sometimes involved ritual or ceremony. Participants described an appreciation and renewed recognition of sacred places. Five of the eight participants specifically mentioned annual pilgrimages connected with a sacred place and the importance that place held in their ongoing personal and spiritual development. Some participants reported that their practices enable a more consistent connection with themselves, a
greater sense of coherence, centeredness, well-being, meaning, and a connection with more enduring and universal wholes.

Max’s stories in particular captured the essence of this pattern of a felt sense of coherence and spirituality. An improvisational pianist, Max had an acute sensitivity to the effects of sound and vibration on the body, place, and space. In his stories, he described different tones within environments, such as a soft hum in the air, the rumble and tension of thunder, whispering, and the rhythms of waves. He picked up on subtle changes in the qualities of a space, such as changes in air current, moisture levels, temperature, the feel of heat radiating from a stone, and the sensation of wind on one’s face. Max was also keenly aware of the power of silence and pause. For him, silence provided space and time to become attuned to shifts in his inner experience, quiet his mind, and allow for receiving the spirit, energy, or current to meet him and flow through him. This dissolving of boundaries opened him up to the full use of his body being immersed in a field of sensations. These included touching, listening, smelling, feeling, breathing, and pausing, all in service of being available to receive and connect with a felt-sense energy in the present moment. For him, accessing this energetic current was a source of flow and creative emergence. Max became a conduit for what was coming through him, which then enabled the expression of that force through the creation of his musical soundscapes.

Another participant, Carole, used felt-sense healing imagery as a practice to help her reduce daily stressors and re-center herself. She described how she would pause, imagine a favorite place, and think of it in exquisite detail, providing a kind of panorama of the place through her imagination. She recalled how it made her feel a sense of groundedness, a connection with the earth, and a sense of well-being and ease, all as part of a greater whole. For
her, healing imagery was a kind of spiritual practice which reconnected her with her favorite place, and thereby, her authentic self.

Some participants’ favorite sacred places were valued for their subjective qualities, which were sources of personal meaning. The historical and ancestral connections of sacred places, their natural, geographic, and resonant energetic attributes, and their welcoming sense of community and belonging supported the recognition of participants’ inner knowing and intuition. In essence, this pattern of a felt-sense of coherence and spirituality revealed a co-influencing relational dynamic between the genius loci in sacred places and the re-awaking of participant’s own resident genius, a recognition of their deeper, truer, authentic selves.

The literature that connects felt-sense experiences, spiritual encounters, and place is relevant to this fourth pattern. Some of the existing research relates to religious sites and sacred places, which include natural locations (mountains, rivers, bodies of water, etc.), sites of historical significance, and special events. Literature on pilgrimages, labyrinths, and walkabouts is also germane. Physical pathways are portrayed as metaphors for personal transformation and rites of passage. The felt-sense of coherence pattern is also a prominent topic across many other fields. A few selected studies more closely aligned with coherence and spirituality bear mentioning.

Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) studied the links between sacred places, religion, and place attachment. Their generalized findings broadly touched on multilayered connections similar to the larger themes in this study. Although their research was derived from secondary sources and it was not phenomenological, their synthesis included aspects of the felt-sense of coherence pattern. They noted that for the individual, experiences in sacred places can be intensely gratifying leading to inner peace, serenity, and tranquility so much so that a person returns to these places for spiritual rejuvenation. Even a collective ritual,
such as pilgrimage, can be a transformative experience for the individual, leading to a greater clarity and awareness of one’s beliefs practices, and role in life. (p. 395)

Although they focused specifically on the connections between spiritual encounters and a few religions with strong emphasis on place, overall Mazumdar and Mazumdar (2004) found that spiritual encounters in place involved physically sensing the sacred in place, engaging in rituals or other practices, and “ultimately creating the sacred in the mind” (p. 395). They also concluded that a strong connection with the sacred forged through visits, places of worship, artifacts, and rituals transcended racial, ethic, and national boundaries, and sacred place ties were important to individual (and collective) identity (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004).

In Centered on the Edge: Mapping the Field of Collective Intelligence and Spiritual Wisdom, the findings of Briskin, Strutt, Erickson, Lederman, and Potter (2001) revealed some overlapping findings with participants’ experiences in the pattern of a felt-sense of coherence and spirituality. Although their study focused on human experiences of collective intelligence, the spiritual descriptions of the reported relational aspects mirrored those expressed in this pattern and this study’s findings about the human–place relationship. Shared terms such as synchronicity, surprise, mysterious, coherence, and unifying were similarly described as a felt-sense experience in this way,

A healing force, and intelligent presence, a creative energy, a generative source...a creative tension between...freedom and belonging—or whatever apparent dualities we use to construct our experience—it’s dynamic evolving relationship...between the reconciliation of seeming dualities in a greater whole that transcends and enfolds them...this occurs through our listening to the call toward something more unifying, more whole, more seamless. (Briskin et al., 2001, p. 40)

One term from Briskin et al.’s (2001) study that was not referred to in the current study, yet was very relevant to the felt-sense of coherence pattern, included quickening, which was described as “a moment when the ‘magic’ happens, a moment of awakening, deepening, quickening, when they seem to transcend their egos or their personalities. They sense a world unseen, unheard, yet
truly more there than anything they’ve experienced before” (p. 11). Other relevant terms from Briskin et al.’s study included communion, timelessness, shimmering, alchemy, oneness, and crucible.

Levi’s (2003) findings also focused on experiences of “group magic,” and since groups are composed of individuals, her research in phenomenological experiences of collective resonance also confirmed the pattern of a felt-sense of coherence and spirituality. Levi (2008) conducted a phenomenological study on the powers of place and how they contribute to collective transformation, which also shared some overlapping findings with this pattern, but again, the focus was on collective experiences.

Schroeder (2008) applied felt-sense focusing to an individual experience in a natural setting. In his findings, he used the term inwardly opening-out to describe the combined experience of serenity and an inward sense of expansion, which also shared characteristics of this pattern. Schroeder did not however indicate the experience was especially powerful or transformative, which this pattern and study stress. There are many other studies, too numerous to include, that align with and substantiate the felt sense pattern of coherence and spirituality. Felt-sense experiences, spiritual encounters, place, and sense of self are all connected through a red thread: phenomenology of place and how meaning is made through experience, which is discussed next.

**Connecting Place Experiences With Sense of Self**

Powerful experiences of place and one’s sense of self are inextricably linked through phenomenology and meaning making. Direct embodied encounters enable the reawakening of a felt-sense—sensory, visceral, intuitive, empathic, transpersonal, and spiritual dimensions—that lend meaning to experiences. Through the indivisible person-world whole, one’s sense of self
and place are understood as “part and parcel,” mutually and intimately co-affecting each other in a synergistic dance. The stories in this study are a testament to the complex associations and rich array of meanings ascribed to powerful experiences in place. Exploring the processes by which those meanings are developed lends further insight into how one’s sense of self is formed, informed, and transformed though, and with, place.

Together, immersed in the relationship between sense of place and sense of self, human beings are availed the reconnection with the primacy of experience. Through that process, they are thereby re-awakened to the richness within themselves, as part of a larger whole. The reconnection enables a heightened awareness of the five senses, proprioception, clairsentience, and even synesthesia—an overlapping and blending of the senses—and other enhanced perceptions and ways of knowing. There is a re-awakening and recognition of being part of a shared constellation that includes ourselves, each other, the natural world, and everything within the whole of life. People do not exist apart from the world, rather, they are entwined within it (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger called this immersion Dasein or being-in-the-world.

**Study Limitations**

This study focused on powerful experiences of place and how they shape one’s sense of self across the lifespan. Five factors affected potential limitations to this study. They were (a) sample size, (b) participant selection, (c) duration, range, and depth of interview, (d) memory recollection reliability, and (f) researcher tendency and bias.

With only eight participants in this study, it was important to select diverse participants who met all the selection criteria. I was somewhat successful in this regard. In terms of age, because participants ranged from 52 to 83, they technically ran across three generations. Four participants came from the silent generation; they were 73, 74, 78 and 83 respectively, born
between 1934 and 1944. Two participants fit within the Baby Boomer generation, ages 64 and 65, and two were slightly younger, from Generation X, ages 53 and 52. Curiously, all participants appeared to share some similar values, despite being over thirty years apart in age. This is likely attributable to the selection process of having picked individuals who expressed a particular interest in the topic of the study, five of whom were scholar-practitioners in fields closely aligned with place-identity and place-making.

It could also be that my network was slanted toward a narrower shared social, political, and cultural orientation. All participants were part of a time in history in North America that inevitably influenced their perspectives, choices, and actions, and there were some common threads among participants’ stories that could be attributed to the gestalt of the times and their stages in life. For example, the themes of political and environmental activism, community facilitation, and leadership development were shared by all. A selection of participants from a wider spectrum of society, or from different cultural backgrounds, could have changed the data and possibly the findings.

Another issue that related to participant selection concerned socio-economic diversity. Most participants fit within a similar socio-economic class, with some variation ranging from approximately lower to upper middle class. They were all university educated, four with master’s degrees and three with doctorates. To some degree, participant selection choices were dictated by the criteria requirements, which inferred a higher level of personal awareness and some advanced education, or certainly the ability to articulate their experiences with the use of more complex language. All participants were White, North American residents, or U.S. nationals. Had the study included participants from a wider socio-economic class, different races, ethnicities, sexual
orientations, or more diverse cultural backgrounds it would have further enriched the data and perhaps given wider applicability to the findings.

With respect to the interview duration, range, and depth, despite initial concerns about one or all of these factors being an issue, I was pleasantly surprised at the level of disclosure and willingness of participants to share memories and personal reflections with me, and these concerns were minimized. I had also been wary that feelings of discomfort might arise due to the participants and I not knowing each other well, but this also proved unfounded. There was considerable depth, range, and rapport in the conversational content, and participants were both forthcoming and self-inquiring. Given two key time constraints—a limitation on the amount of time for the interviews, and my own need to complete the research in a timely way, the quality of the data was high. However, time constraints, imperfect interviewing skills, and my own inexperience still posed restrictions to this study.

Memory recall is another issue, which presented limitations and biases for participants and myself as the primary researcher. As previously noted, both implicit and explicit memory recollection is subjective and selective, and human beings are known for unreliable memory recall (Chawla, 1992; Gilbert, 2006; Knez, 2014). Memory reconstruction and reinterpretation are subject to the changing working models of human beings through an ongoing process of re-evaluation and personal development. Cognitive memory biases such as hindsight bias, choice-supporting bias, context effect, and availability heuristic influence biases and decision-making choices (Kahneman, 2012). My own internal working models, frames of mind, levels of development, biases, and preferences inevitably affected the analysis and lens through which the entire research process was conceived, viewed, carried-out, and synthesized.
Implications of This Study and Future Research

Looking more generally across the findings and patterns that emerged from this study, both new information and further questions were gleaned through the research process. The findings in this study suggest that powerful experiences of place can most certainly shape one’s sense of self, both in subtle and dramatic ways. The dynamically changing self is continuously negotiating and balancing the tension between the safe and stable known, and the unpredictable, discovery oriented unknown. In that process, the self must either assimilate, accommodate, or balance incoming information into the identity’s simultaneously enduring and changing nature. All change happens within the context of “someplace,” and the stories in this study revealed that place was integral to participants’ powerful experiences and changing sense of self. The recognition of a co-influencing tripartite relationship between place, powerful experiences, and sense of self has several implications.

In terms of positively shaping identity and sense of self, the cultivation of a greater awareness of the relational dynamic between people and places is in order. Place attachment, place identity, place-preferences, and dis-placement are often experienced unconsciously or tacitly, which can make for unconscious decision-making about the impact on the relationship of place, humans, and living systems. Unconscious decision-making can manifest in anything from poorly designed schools, homes, communities, and cities to the loss of protection of natural environments and species, or far worse, the current course: the blatant destruction of ecosystems and the planet earth. Once brought to the surface however, a felt-sense awareness of one’s environmental autobiography can lead to a recognition of one’s self-schemas and internal working models of the human–place relationship. Place could then be understood more multidimensionally, as a living, co-evolving partner. The shift from an I–It to an I–Thou relationship
with place could lead to a positive ripple effect and an untold number of changes in relational dynamics for systems at all levels.

A partnership perspective with place could lead to greater respect for the wisdom and history of places, and what they have to teach us and share with us. In turn, positive collective futures could co-evolve through a shared appreciation of all stakeholder voices within a system, and within nested systems, resulting in a potential rebalancing from the current anthropocentric system to one that is eco-systems centered.

Another implication of this research is in the area of formative place attachment, place identity, and place multicenteredness. If, as the findings in this study suggested, individuals re-seek formative experiences of place, then the importance of caring for and respecting places, as well as providing positive place experiences, cannot be underestimated. Further reinforcing this point is the recognition that later recalled, formative place experiences held a lifetime of memories and remembering. Powerful formative experiences of place serve as high leverage priming potential for the human–place relationship. Early working models of how the human–place relationship is conceived thus have long-term ramifications, for individuals, places, and the ripple effects on the human–place relationship and other systems.

Further research into individual and group internal working models of the human–place relational dynamic, and how meaning is made from that across time, could be useful. Along those lines, connecting the work on fixed versus flexible mindset (Dweck, 2000, 2006) with the formation of place attachment, place-identity, and place multicenteredness, could be interesting to explore further. Do identity self-theories, internal working models, and mindset influence the development of strong or weak place ties? If so, how? Beyond formative place attachments and place identities, how might these ideas extend to adult place ties? Comparing individuals with a
propensity for a fixed versus flexible mindset and examining if there is relationship, inclination, or predisposition between individuals’ sense of rootedness (or mobility) and how fixed or flexible they are in their thinking and identity could be another area of inquiry.

A complementary area of research could be the changing relationship between place identity, localism, globalism, and place identity with respect to multicenteredness. Gustafson (2001) and others’ research on the changing dynamic interplay between preferences for roots or routes needs further investigation, especially in the current climate of whole communities and mass migrations.

Beyond mindset, working models, and self-theories, the findings from this study encourage further consideration of how to attend to peoples’ ongoing sense of self-development, placement, and sense of embodiment in place across the lifespan. The perennial process of identity evolution enables different stages of development in the human lifecycle. When catalyzed by powerful experiences of place, changes in one’s sense of self can be better understood through further distinctions in dimensions of experiences. This study employed five dimensions of transformative experiences to do that: peak, plateau, nadir, epiphany, and liminal states. Future research on the specific impact of each of these five dimensions of powerful experiences with regard to place is needed.

With time, the co-affecting person–place relationship becomes more nuanced, and in this study was shown to culminate in an increase in participants’ felt-sense of spirituality, healing, and coherence. Sacred places and spaces have a long history of inspiring meaningful affective and spiritual encounters, engendering a range of feelings from safety, security, and belonging (The Known) to discovery, possibility, and becoming (The Unknown). The indication that spirituality plays an important role in participants’ development of their sense of self across time,
in conjunction with the expressed recognition that place and space are integral to spiritual experiences, is noteworthy and calls for further research.

Although participants’ individual experiences may have been understood through varying religious or non-religious affiliations, their powerful experiences of place were no less significant to their evolving sense of self. Amidst the fast-paced, changing environment of the contemporary volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, the findings in this study suggest that the context of sacred places offers an antidote to a sense of disorientation and alienation through powerful experiences of place. Future research on the implications of the role of sacred geographies and places bears future inquiry.

Along these lines, and in terms of suggestions for future research, retrospective environmental autobiography for people of all ages, and in particular the elderly, could contribute to the improved development of all living environments, especially for senior arrangements and care facilities. Many of those places are currently perceived as lacking soul and a sense of place. With an aging baby boomer population—potentially, soon to be changing living places—a greater understanding of their needs and preferences with respect to their quality of life in place as they age, could yield insights into how to help them age well so they can continue to contribute to their communities as elders. The building and home industries, healthcare, community development, urban renewal and re-development, and place-making fields could all benefit from this kind research.

In line with this thinking, further diverse interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research, especially qualitative, could be fruitful and is called for across the following fields: sense of place and place-identity (Proshansky et al., 1983; Tuan, 1977; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), sense of self and identity process (Breakwell, 1993, 2010; Leary & Tangney, 2012), and
powerful experiences (Campbell, 1949/2008; Maslow, 1962, 1964, 1971; Mezirow, 2000). More targeted inquiries are called for regarding the relationship between the spirit, genius loci, and sense of a place and human interdependence. What are the different ways that this mutually co-affecting relationship enables reconnection with one’s own resident genius?

Another area ripe for continued exploration is how the person–place relationship might be better optimized for leadership development. Executive leadership programs and youth leadership training in particular could more consciously consider the role of place in facilitating powerful experiences. Place conscious leadership development could serve to facilitate and reinforce embodied insights and touchstones toward new stories of personal evolution and a positive changing sense of self. Research into the person–place relationship with respect to environmental education for children, adults, and the elderly continues to be an important area of inquiry, connecting behaviors with working models toward greater environmental awareness, appreciation, and accountability.

**Final Reflections and Conclusion**

Whether through nature in its most elemental form, the vital energy of a city that is alive with activity, a sacred site, or any number of other places that hold special meaning, the spirit of place can re-connect individuals with their authentic selves. A sense of aliveness, healing, renewal, and possibility awaits those who can intentionally connect with the energetic field and genius loci of place, enabling them in the process to attune to themselves and the universal current of life. Powerful experiences of place are one such means of access. Cooper Marcus (2010) shared this sentiment in an autobiography, describing the nature of her own powerful relationship with her special place:

My place of pilgrimage and re-birth… the place to which I am drawn again and again, with a deep magnetic attraction. [The island] is my lover, my teacher, my place of
balance and deep joy. It is my axis mundi, the place on earth where I feel a profound connection between the life of my earthbound body and the aspirations of my heaven-seeking spirit...when I find myself engaged in dialogue with some aspect of the natural world—a tree, a lake, a rock—I am not partaking of some sentimental anthropomorphizing of nature, but attempting to comprehend our mutual interdependence. (pp. 64-65)

In a world of experiences from birth to death, knowing and feeling the power of place and allowing it to shape gently one’s sense of self in an intentional and mutually co-affecting way can add meaning, purpose, and agency to one’s life. Powerful experiences of place enable a reawakening of “our place in the world and its place inside us” (Sternberg, 2009, p. 295). Fostering powerful experiences of place, and valuing places as an extension of, and complement to, one’s identity offers and extends the possibility for a sense of reciprocal care between one’s self and the other, as part of a larger, coherent whole.

I would like to share two stories of how the wisdom of place supported me in the last part of this dissertation journey. Having spent the better part of the past 9 months in front of a computer screen, and feeling under pressure to finish my work, I finally concluded (with evidence and reminders from this study) that multiple daily walks in both a park and nearby neighborhood street in my home in The Hague were essential requirements for my well-being. Walks in my neighborhood are filled with beauty, architectural delights, a charming canal and pond with waterfowl, large old trees, and the potential surprise meeting of a friend or neighbor. This is my place, at least for now. I am certain that my own essential experiences of what I value in this place gave me access to my own essential self, which I then brought back to my writing. This insight was available to me the whole time I struggled to see the larger patterns in this work. Still, I was not always able to recognize and trust my own felt-sense and knowing of the power of place to inspire this dissertation’s unfolding process, even though I “knew” cognitively that what was required for me to feel and see the larger picture and purpose of this work.
I was also reminded, not only through those daily rituals, but also from my own potent memories of powerful experiences of place, how reconnecting with felt-sense experiences can touch me deeply in an instant. A further reinforcing fresh reminder from one committee member, Alan, toward the end of this journey, also served to keep that fire alive within me. Alan shared the story of an Australian Aboriginal artist, who, upon seeing his work in a European museum, was brought to tears. Alan explained that the artist’s tears arose not from the joy of having found his work in a prominent museum. Rather, encountering, seeing, and feeling his work reconnected him with the power and spirit of the place he was from, which inspired his work in the first place. In that process, the artist reawakened to the truth of his own spirit and genius, thereby dissolving the boundaries between himself and a larger unified field, and thereby inducing his tears.

Looking once again back over the transcripts of the conversations with my participants, I was also struck by the grace of my having found these very people to share my inquiry. Each of their stories, histories, and unique spirits served as a source of inspiration for me, especially when I was confused or even lost in the dissertation process. They, and others, including my editor-friend, my committee members, and my fellow study group learners, each had kernels of wisdom for me, and each brought an important spark to this discovery process. Each person was a different kind of angel on my shoulder, reminding me through their very presence to go back to the essential, because it is there, and only there, from which anything new emerges. As much as I love camping out in the online library searching for endless treasures and inspiration, this study and this process have been a wise reminder to be sure to have my discovery include a “returning to the things themselves” for a truly fresh experience.
Cultivation of an enhanced awareness is not only critical for one’s self, but also for all the nested systems within which humans are an interconnected part. What are the best ways to cultivate an appreciative recognition and corresponding action toward supporting the human–place relationship? Given that the well-being of planet earth is at risk, there is no time, or place, like the precious present to facilitate personal awakening and leadership through essential experiences of place. The restoration of wholeness and renewal, for ourselves and all our fragile ecosystems, is long overdue, and continued efforts toward awakening the human spirit through place is one way to help move us forward.

This study brings home to each and every person the role and power of place in our lives as a means of reflecting back who we have been, who we are, and who we might become. We each have an environmental autobiography that subtly directs our sense of self. An intentional recognition of this fact is an underutilized leverage point in our individual and communal development. We also have a future vision of who we might become that pulls us toward our next best selves, which is an equally potent leverage point toward creative action. Attuning to who we are, in place, is a connection with the human community, the larger collective, and the universal we. Through forming, informing, and transforming powerful experiences of place, we are reminded of who we truly are. Such experiences serve to inspire and enable us to make the necessary changes we need to make not only to survive on this place we call home, but to consciously and collectively co-evolve.
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### APPENDICES

**Appendix A: Powerful Experiences of Place by Themed Category**

Table A1

*Summary of Participants’ Descriptions of Powerful Experiences of Place by Themed Category*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Keyword description</th>
<th>Carole</th>
<th>Diana</th>
<th>Bart</th>
<th>Ralph</th>
<th>Gina</th>
<th>Gary</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>POWERFUL EXPERIENCES OF PLACE</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of instances description was mentioned, discussed, or inferred by participant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. NATURAL ELEMENTS, GEOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Beauty, Aesthetics</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilderness, Wild, Jungle</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pristine, Pure, Untouched</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trees, Forest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultivated Garden, Plants</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mountains, Hills, Peak, Summit</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canyon, Valley</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Island, Bay, Coastline</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vastness, Vistas</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>River, Pool, Inlet, Waterhole</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geological Formations, Rocks</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desert, Steppe, or Outback</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remoteness</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather-Sun, Snow, Storm</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stars, Light, Air</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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**E. POSSIBILITY, BECOMING, LIMINALITY, THE UNKNOWN**

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Appendix B: Types and Dimensions of Powerful Experiences

Table B1

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Appendix C: Synthesis of Themed Categories, Types, and Dimensions of Powerful Experiences

Table C1

Synthesis and Summary of Themed Categories of Participants’ Descriptions of Powerful Experiences of Place Related to the Types and Dimensions of Powerful Experiences

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