

An Encounter with One's Deeper Self and Energy: A Phenomenological Study Among Spiritually Engaged Individuals in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Natural environments are the setting for spiritual experiences for people from all over the world. Interpretative phenomenological explorations of such experiences are scarce, even though the method suits the topic. We conducted field interviews with 18 Dutch visitors of a Dutch spiritual festival on how they (1) describe spiritual experiences in natural environments and (2) see the role of different natural attributes in these experiences. Principle descriptive concepts for spiritual experiences were a deeper self and spiritual energy. Aspects of nature facilitating such experiences were wilder sites, open spaces, sacred sites, sites remembered from childhood, old trees, animals, water, and fire, each adding a quality to the experience that resembled its innate properties. Participants agreed on the positive impact of these experiences on their well-being, mentioning different degrees of long-term benefit. Key Words: Connection to nature—Ecotherapy—Interpretative phenomenology—Spiritual experience—Well-being.

1. Introduction

Imagine the sensation of being so connected to a forest that it is impossible to tell where you end and it starts. Spiritual experiences in nature are among humans' most significant life events, and societal interest in them is increasing worldwide (Heintzmann, 2010; Snell & Simmonds, 2012; Taylor, 2005). For example, indigenous norms and values emphasizing the close spiritual bond between humans and nature are increasingly studied (De Pater, 2010; Verschuuren et al., 2010). A growing body of evidence suggests that connection with nature benefits a person's well-being to different degrees (Chalquist, 2009; Feral, 1998; MacKerron & Mourato, 2013; Martens et al., 2011; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Warber et al., 2011), including in the long term (DeMares, 2000; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Snell & Simmonds, 2012). Many authors expect that environmental loss could be countered by increased societal recognition of the human connection to nature (Garfield et al., 2014; Harvey, 2003; Zylstra et al., 2014).

Spiritual experiences in nature are defined as an overwhelming instant of emotional or cognitive connection with the ecological surroundings—sometimes perceived as a conscious or intelligent spirit—leading to heightened sensorial perceptions and ultimately to feelings of transcendence (Liu & Robertson, 2011; Snell & Simmonds, 2012; Taylor, 2001a; Williams & Harvey, 2001). The words “spiritual” and “connection to nature” are debated extensively (Schroll et al., 2011; Zylstra et al., 2014). Important topics include the duration of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1976), the influence

of religious and personal backgrounds (De Pater et al., 2008; Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2012), the degree of commitment necessary for such experiences (Atchley, 1997; Davis, 1998), and the ability of natural environments to overrule other factors when acting as trigger (De Pater et al., 2008; Heintzmann, 2010; Williams & Harvey, 2001).

Various authors agree that spiritual experiences in natural environments are at the core of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology (Atchley, 1997; Benson et al., 2003; Davis, 2011; Roszak et al., 1995; Scull, 2008; Snell et al., 2011). In this understanding, spiritual experiences radically shift the worldview from isolated self-identities toward collective and transcendental self-identities, where nature is part of a larger self, comparable to family (Davis, 2011; Liu & Robertson, 2011). A lasting process of transformation is seen as an important remedy for the ailment of disconnection with nature, which could otherwise cause a variety of psychological dysfunctions (Chalquist, 2009; Feral, 1998; Louv, 2005; Warber et al., 2011) and destructive behavior to nature (Davis, 1998; Garfield et al., 2014; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Zylstra et al., 2014).

Without focusing on psychological backgrounds, some researchers have emphasized specific aspects of natural environments as triggers for spiritual experiences. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999), studying diaries of a group of female wilderness trekkers, found that attributes such as carcasses or weather shifts act as a trigger for contemplation and subsequent spiritual experiences. Studying forest managers' views, De Pater et al. (2008) found that old trees can be a cue to reflect upon one's own aged life. Taylor (2001b), describes the story of a woman becoming so intimately connected to a tree that she stops being vegetarian because she recognizes plants' consciousness. In a comparative study of the effects of "wild" versus "tended" natural areas on visitors' well-being, Martens et al. (2011) discovered that visitors were more relaxed and happier after a walk through a "tended" forest than through a "wilder" one. These findings suggest that specific attributes of nature influence the qualities of spiritual experiences.

Spiritual and transpersonal explorations have been framed as lacking experiential ground (Schroll et al., 2011). Davis (1998) argues that studying spiritual experiences from different perspectives, including those of ordinary people, could support the theory of ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology. Interpretative phenomenological research focused specifically on spiritual experiences in nature and their consequences for people is limited to a few cases (De Pater et al., 2008; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzmann, 2010; Snell & Simmonds, 2012; Taylor, 2001b). This study aims to further explore this subject by interviews with visitors to a Dutch

festival that, in its aims and program, centers on spiritual development and transformation. Similar to what authors have observed for the New Age movement (Hill et al., 2000; Ivakhiv, 2003; Lewis, 1992; Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, 2014; Taylor, 2005), visitors to this festival explicitly search for spirituality beyond the traditional institutions of religion, and in this search give a central place to experiences in nature. Because they are purposefully engaged in spirituality and nature and thus have developed views on it, investigating the lived experiences of these persons can shed more light on the spiritual dimensions of nature for broader movements engaged in this theme. Two questions guide our research: (1) How do spiritually engaged individuals describe spiritual experiences in nature? (2) Which natural attributes do they describe that contribute to these experiences, and what is this contribution?

2. A Phenomenological Design

Interpretative phenomenology is a good entrance point for the study of the human experience of nature (Brown & Toadvine, 2003). Its purpose is to study phenomena through the eyes of subjects who find them valuable (Moustakas, 1994). It acknowledges the limitations of researchers' and participants' views and commits to solve this by (1) actively restraining from jumping into quick descriptions and conclusions and (2) looking for intersubjective explanations for the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2003). It assumes linkage, even if complex, between what people say and their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

We recruited spiritually engaged participants at the Dutch "Open Up" festival in July 2010. Participants had a broad age range (26–65) and an even male/female ratio. Among them were eight visitors, three organizers, and seven professional spiritual healers. At the time of the interviews, all lived in cities or rural areas in the Netherlands.

After a pilot interview at the festival, we conducted 18 semi-structured interviews in a natural site of each participant's choosing. After consent, audiotaped interviews were held, lasting for 1–2 hr. We asked participants to define "spirituality" or, if preferred, "meditation." With follow-up questions we subsequently guided the interview by participants' spiritual experiences in nature toward their experience of that very moment in the selected natural site. We used mindfulness techniques (Ucok, 2006) to cultivate an empathic attitude and to restrain from premature judgments.

We transcribed the interviews verbatim and analyzed them in three steps after Moustakas (1994): reducing the content to "objects of experience," identifying emergent themes (Section 3), and synthesizing meanings and essences with literature (Section 4). For the analysis we used notes, narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004),

mind-map summaries to interlink “objects of experience,” and a single validation of the interpretations with participants. [For more detailed information on the methods, see Havik (2011)].

3. Results

3.1. Spirituality and nature

Spirituality was articulated in 13 ways (Table 1). The most common descriptions were “looking for the essence of life,” “observation,” “growing in awareness,” “setting your borders,” and “something personal.” Less common were “love,” “relaxation,” “paying attention to the spirit,” “something indefinable,” “feeling a connection with your surroundings,” and “nature.” Uncommon were “a childlike experience” and “an explanation for the unexplainable.” Two persons expressed no affection for the term “spirituality” and saw it as overly commercialized.

Natural environments contribute to spiritual experiences for all participants (Table 2). For three participants, nature and spirituality are entangled, and nature is indispensable for a spiritual life. Six participants see nature as the building blocks of life and thus the basis of a spiritual life. Three others explain that life or the spirit is present in everything and that this can be felt strongly in nature, but presence

Table 1. Articulated Descriptions of the Term “Spirituality” and the Amounts of Participants Sharing that Description

ARTICULATED MEANING OF “SPIRITUALITY”	# PARTICIPANTS
Looking for the essence of life	6
Observation/awareness	5
Growing in awareness	5
Setting your borders	6
Something personal	5
Love	3
Relaxation	3
Paying attention to the spirit	3
Something indefinable	3
Connection with your surroundings	3
Nature	2
A child	1
An explanation for the unexplainable	1

Table 2. Articulated Description of the Way Nature and Spirituality Are Related in the Views of the Participants, and the Number of People Sharing This Understanding

ARTICULATED RELATION NATURE-SPIRITUALITY	# PARTICIPANTS
Nature and spirituality are entangled	3
Nature builds spirituality	6
Spirit is strongly felt in nature	3
Nature is a reminder of primordial forces	5
Both nature and spirituality allow letting go	1

in nature is not indispensable to experience spirituality. Five others find that nature reminds us of a primordial, more pure and childlike aspect of ourselves. For one person, the principle link between nature and spirituality is that both allow letting go of mental struggles.

In this section, we first discuss two common denominators of the spiritual experience in nature we extracted from our participants’ narratives. We then proceed with the most important attributes of nature. Quotes are extracts from the interviews translated from Dutch. Names are fictitious, and gender and age are between parentheses.

3.2. Deeper self comes to the surface

Central in the descriptions of our participants’ experience in nature is the experience of a deeper self, which some called a more original or more grounded self or the soul. Participants ascribe it the characteristics of a pleasant inner space of being and of a sense through which they perceive differently. They believe that the deeper self is embedded inside everyone, hidden under the personal fears and the distractions of chitchat of the mind. Experiencing the deeper self is a calm and grounded way of being that gives direction. It is the experience and acceptance of who a person essentially is. Ferdinand (M, 45) explains: “I think that if people talk about spirituality, that it has to do with the restfulness I feel when I don’t run away for my emotions. There is no battle going on at that moment.” Anthony (M, 47) explains this feeling by placing it in the context of specific sites he chooses for gatherings: “I feel welcome there. Safe. At home.” Betty (F, 50) explains how you can increase your awareness of the deeper self and open it up to your natural surroundings:

You can do it consciously. You can sit down, and then you can set an intention ... that you are completely in your body, and that

you open your heart completely for yourself; really, just for yourself. That's how you start. ... and then I set the intention to open up for nature, together with my soul. And then nature opens up to me. They are a lot of words, but it happens in just a few seconds.

Sixteen participants refer to the cleansing effect natural environments have in terms of release from the grip of the mind. Rachel (F, 38) illustrates how this brings her in touch with her deeper self:

The circle of life, the cleansing aspect that the forest brings along. ... My thoughts ... with every breath I take I can let go of things. ... And because trees supply us with oxygen, there can be no better ... more beautiful place than between trees ... ha-ha.

Some participants are of the opinion that the deeper self is not divided from the surroundings. It exists as a way of perceiving in which the own emotions, sensorial perceptions, cognition, and spirit are one. Betty (F, 50) illustrates this as follows:

And then I just ask myself for an answer from the sea and then the waves come rolling towards me and in a second I know what it is ... it gives me a very free feeling. The grandness so to speak.

Three participants say their sensorial perceptions increase after sinking into their deeper self. This makes them better aware of the life in their surroundings. Elisabeth (F, 30): "With strong nature experiences I don't feel alone, as I do sometimes on other occasions."

All participants report personified understandings of natural beings. Eliot (M, 36) explains a level of close identification with a beech as follows: "This is a beech ... but it feels more like a grandma. ... If you stand against it, then you'll be embraced, and you can listen to the stories."

Three participants mention that by being in touch with nature, the deeper self can know beyond logical reasoning. They call it a more intuitive knowing. Elisabeth (F, 30) explains:

It isn't that I believe that the tree whispers an answer in my ear, but I feel a broadening when I am with such a big tree. More clarity in myself. My intuition strengthens. I receive the answers from myself. But the contact with the tree does create space for that knowing.

Six participants say people connect more easily with others when in a natural environment because of this closer touch with the deeper self. Eight participants mention an increase in attention for themselves and the other. Indeed, most classify this attention as more real than casual attention. Rachel (F, 38) says: "What I do notice, is that

conversations are less superficial when you are in the woods, when you are in nature so to speak."

In sum, getting back to a deeper aspect of yourself with sincere attention for yourself and your surroundings is an important emergent theme in this study. For participants, it leads to heightened perceptions, clarity, and intuition, sometimes together with a sense of being surrounded by life. Participants seem to understand the process of sinking into self literally as a descending of their energy.

3.3. Energy in nature experiences

Seventeen of the eighteen participants describe the perspective of spiritual energy. They believe that humans as well as nature are composed of both a material and an energetic part and that these two are intertwined. Most mention chakras, which are energetic vortexes along the spine. They also speak about auras, radiating energy clouds around the body. Through these energetic fields, they believe they are in touch with the energetic fields of other beings. Danny (M, 57) explains: "In living nature, you feel fluctuations of presence."

Though trees have separate auras, participants also mention perceiving energies of groups of trees or entire forests. Eliot (M, 36) speaks of a spatial type of energy also known as Tao, which is rooted outside the material world: "The forest has a similar ancient energy ... infinite space." Carry (F, 46) equally describes the prominent presence of a space outside the material world, linked with a healing frequency of forests: "The forest has a very clear vibration." Eliot (M, 36) explains it as follows: "I think that a tree is far more coherent by nature. And I think that you ... that you can tune in. And resonate along with the tree."

Some characterize their interaction with the energetic fields of nature in a more liquidlike way. Elizabeth (F, 30) says: "I felt a stream, sexual too, and that I err ... some sort of dance. That I just let myself move, roll through the grass, against a tree, around the tree ... haha." Christian (M, 27) describes how such liquid "flow" like energy can also interact with blockages in his own energetic system:

That by certain thoughts or convictions, or situations in life, you can get yourself stuck. That you had a bad experience, or contrarily, that you fall in love and circulate around that, and that in that way the energy, say, you lock it up. And ehh, I mean that if you enter nature, that your energy will flow freely again. ... And because of this flow you feel ... errr. Feel that you become alive? I don't know. More alive, at least.

Several participants mention encounters with individual trees. They perceive trees' energies in several ways. Danny (M, 57) describes a visual type:

A while ago I stood on a stump of a cut-off beech, with a diameter of a meter at least ... and if you stand on that for a bit, and wonder "what do I feel?" that then the image of this tree rises above you. It's still there. It's not gone at all; just its physical body is gone. Its whole energy is still there.

Garry (M, 45) describes a heartbeat-like experience with a living tree:

So I rested and put my back against a tree, and I was just still for quite some time, and then I experienced a very very gentle, almost like the tree ... it was just a slight hint of something, a pulse ...

Several believe that with its energy, a tree can reach out to passersby. Fritz (M, 44): "In one way or another that [energy, feeling of solid calmness] enters your body. Err ... the body can really feel the 'being a tree' so to speak."

Experiences with this energy heighten participants' attention and clarity of mind, increase their life force, increase their feeling of connection with other beings, and increase their feeling of being part of a bigger whole. Other feelings they described are delight, ecstasy, healing, power, and love. They did not report any negative impacts of experiencing such energies.

In sum, participants seem to see spiritual energies as the medium in which their deeper selves reside and through which they can get in touch with different, deeper qualities of nature.

3.4. Important natural attributes and their spiritual impacts

Participants mention several attributes of natural environments that have a specific effect on their state of mind (Table 3). Trees are an important topic for 15 participants, who describe intimate forms of connection (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3), particularly with older ones. Participants find trees beneficial even when positioned in an urban area.

They agree that open spaces have a positive effect on the overview of their life. They say that expanded landscapes such as fields, deserts, and the horizon of the sea can help them expand their attention. This helps them reorganize their thoughts or remember forgotten tasks. Some participants mention that these places facilitate their attention for feelings and emotions they have been avoiding. They describe presence in such spaces as effortless meditation.

The unexpected meeting with animals is another emerging theme. Participants mention feeling a primordial power when they see or hear impressive animals. Eliot (M, 36) narrates spending the night in the forest: "The owls, the tawny owl, every night you heard those tawny owls there. Communicate with each other, soooo. ... That is such an ... intense sound ... that is so mysterious. So pure."

Table 3. Frequently Mentioned Attributes of Natural Sites, With the Description of the Experience per Attribute and the Amount of Participants Mentioning the Attribute

ATTRIBUTE OF NATURAL SITE	DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE	# PARTICIPANTS
Open spaces	Overview over life, expanded attention, acknowledgement of forgotten feelings	10
Trees	Communication, feeling of being a tree, grounding, being noticed, soothing, absence of judgment, life force	15
(Wild) Animals	Connection, communication, power, delight, cruelty, pain, life, dynamism	10
Sacred sites	Woolly, light, purifying, transformative, stillness, cleansing energy	6
Wild sites	Low feeling of "manipulation," freedom, cleansing air	5
Childhood spots	Memories, recalling old states of mind, connection to a more original self	3
Water: (1) lake, (2) sea	(1) Silence, musing, seeing colors, energies. (2) Hearing sounds, smells, grandness, power	8
Fire	Silence, meditative state, timelessness, connection, being in control, escape from reality, reminder of inner fire	3

Participants also narrate the dynamic feeling caused by presence of diverse little animals on a natural site and the delight they feel on such occasions. Some participants add that they communicate with animals through feelings and through close reciprocal observation. When we meet a group of highland cows, Danny (M, 57) says: "Well, try to stand on a distance and to be in contact with such an animal. Could be close as well, usually if they're calm, but you will notice that they cast around a very solid and calm energy." Several participants speak of the cruelty animals can have and of how this helps them accept that injustice is sometimes part of life.

Six participants mention sacred natural sites. They perceive enhanced energy, increased stillness, a woolly feeling, warmth, or light, and two participants say they see colors around plants at such sites. Five participants see a relationship between the wildness of the natural site and the depth of its sacredness, where wilder sites are more sacred. Two of them explain that wild places make them feel

freer and less interfered with by other humans. Fin (M, 48) illustrates a different feeling between a wilder site and a planted site:

A good nature experience is felt. Yes. That's how it is. ... I feel warm, woolly, soft ... a tingling starts ... one place feels more pleasant, and the other less. ... Look, in the summer, if it's full of leaves here, then it is a delight to walk here. But if you get over there, a bit ahead, near the pine trees, that's all planted in straight lines, you know? That feels a lot less pleasant.

Some participants believe that a site's sacredness can be caused by human rituals or by earth magnetism. Participants who mention sacred spots return there regularly. One partakes in rituals at such spots.

Three participants took the researcher to a place they have known from childhood. Such places bring up memories of past experiences. They believe that their past states of mind are connected to deeper layers of themselves.

Participants commonly mention two more important attributes. Eight participants talk about presence of water. They are attracted by the stillness of a pond or the dynamism of the sea (see Table 3). Betty (F, 50) says: "Those waves, the sound. ... It's the sounds ... and the air that bring me at ease." Three participants expressively talk about their connection to fire. As opposed to urban regions, more natural areas grant them the freedom to make a campfire. One associates it with inner fire. Elisabeth (F, 30) says: "I feel very connected to fire also. If you're talking about na ... [nature]. ... If you are talking about silencing my mind, so directly ... entering a meditative state, then it's with fire."

Nine further emphasize that natural sites' silence and low amount of imposed impulses allow them to relax. They are able to emerge from the forceful focus of the daily life. One participant notes that this release allows him to *give* attention, instead of it being pulled from him. Participants say these experiences facilitate numerous long-term benefits.

3.5. Long-term effects of spiritual experiences in nature

In the long term, spiritual experiences in nature help participants have fewer needless fears and act more fluently, more in touch with the environment and with more overview. Six participants feel more creative after every time they visit a natural area. Seven participants say that after visits to nature they take better care of their bodies, their living environments, and their friendships.

Regular presence in natural areas has provided healing of severe psychological problems for four participants. Three experienced a burnout and felt helped by the serenity found in nature. One par-

ticipant felt supportive benefits during the healing process of a psychosis. Timothy (M, 35) explains how his dense thoughts became more bearable: "It's like a thundercloud that is blown apart, and turns into a group of fleecy clouds that you can watch in a far more relaxed way."

Long-term presence in nature has facilitated important turning points in the lives of eight participants. During such periods people feel empowered to let go of personal burdens, which helps them navigate life in a way that suits them better. They adapt their metaphysical frameworks of nature and tune their lifestyles to its rhythm. Some participants regularly go on retreats in natural areas; two have even moved to the forest.

Five participants perceive a deepening of their nature experiences over time that goes hand in hand with an increasing need for such experiences for their well-being. Six narratives suggest long-term fluctuations of the participants' capacity and need to have spiritual experiences in natural sites. The need can for example be higher during periods of stress or after returning from a long journey.

Overall, participants describe numerous reasons why they highly value nature in their lives, and many say they could not have their spiritually engaged lifestyles without it.

4. Discussion

The objective of this research was to gain deeper understanding of the lived reality of spiritual experiences in nature for spiritually engaged people and of the natural attributes that trigger such experiences for them. The themes emerging from the rich narratives provide insight into a lived reality of intimate connection and communication with nature through a deeper self and spiritual energy. In the following discussion we will take up the themes that were most salient in our findings.

Participants frame a highly sensitive and intuitive part of themselves, the deeper self, perceiving deeper qualities, that becomes more prominent in natural surroundings. Their emphasis on the capacity of the deeper self to know intuitively has much in common with the Goethe's "Delicate Empirism," where attention, imagination, and intuition are valued as legitimate ways of learning from nature (Seamon & Zajonc, 1998; Wahl, 2005). Deeper answers to questions about their role and place in society seem to play an important role in this experience. Participants' reliance on knowledge of the deeper self highlights the value personal experiences in nature can have for informing our understanding of life and is in line with views expressed earlier in ecopsychology (Bragg, 1996; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Davis, 1998; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Næss, 1985; Roszak, 1992; Yunt, 2001).

Participants abundantly used the metaphysical framework of spiritual energies to fathom how their intimate connection with natural surroundings takes place. They appear to understand energy as an omnipresent medium that entangles the spirits of all living beings. Some perceive it visually; others describe it as a sensation of liquid “flow” or vibration and resonance. Their notion that such energies are present in a stronger form in natural sites is in line with findings of earlier studies in various social contexts (Ivakhiv, 2003; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Taylor, 2001b; Verschuuren et al., 2010). Strong emphasis on energy concepts is not reported in similar phenomenological explorations of spiritual experiences in nature that targeted other participant categories (De Pater et al., 2008; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzmann, 2010; Snell & Simmonds, 2012). Related experiences were reported, however, for instance in a statement quoted by Fredrickson and Anderson (1999): “I felt something incredibly powerful at that place, but I couldn’t hold it in my hands ... and the feeling of that place was almost palpable” (p. 34). The understanding of the essence of the environment as a continuous mass, connected by energy, as opposed to the environment composed of separated entities is in line with ecopsychological, transpersonal, and ecophenomenological views (Brown & Toadvine, 2003; Davis, 2011; Roszak, 1992; Snell et al., 2011). Indeed, Davis (2003) embraced “vibrational energy” for describing empathic communication as a transcendent creation of a synchronized energy field. Though we think the topic deserves further exploration, it should be noted that the word “energy” in these contexts has a plethora of uses (Hume, 1998; Ivakhiv, 2003).

The described process of releasing attention from the fixation on personal fears and mental chitchat and entering a silent state of mind is similar to earlier descriptions such as Attention Restoration Theory, also resulting in spiritual experiences (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1995; Snell & Simmonds, 2012; Williams & Harvey, 2001). This interpretation is supported by the opinion of some participants that being in nature helps them be more caring and less judgmental to their companions, something that would otherwise cost active attention management (Kabat-Zinn, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; Shapiro et al., 2006). Previous studies also found increased altruistic and prosocial behavior by people when in natural environments (Guéguen & Stefan, 2014; Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Weinstein et al., 2009). By describing presence in nature as effortless meditation, participants confirm nature’s potential benefit for a range of emotional, cognitive, and social processes.

Likely because of these benefits, some participants see having spiritual experiences in nature as a spiritual *need*, comparable to Snell and Simmonds’ “calling” (2012). They reserve time to visit

nature regularly or have even moved to the forest. This finding is in line with Meier’s claim (1985) that “Excessive interference with outer nature creates of necessity disorder of the inner nature, for the two are intimately connected” (p. 2). It seems that our participants actively try to solve this. This finding contributes to the notion of nature deficit disorder (Louv, 2005), which is increasingly grounded empirically (Chalquist, 2009; Feral, 1998; MacKerron & Mourato, 2013; Snell & Simmonds, 2012).

We observed that the quality of the experience participants described often had much in common with the properties of the site (Table 3). Open spaces were said to give overview, the sea reminded of grandness, fire reminded of inner fire, and still waters of an inner stillness. This interpretation relates to Relph’s (1976) definition of “existential insideness,” a deep, gradual identification with a place, shaping behavior and experience spatially. Participants appear susceptible to undergoing this process quickly, perhaps because they trust the natural surroundings as transcendental family (Davis, 2011).

In line with Meier’s statement (1985), participants mention that being in wilder areas helps with forgetting human interference, allowing them to be who they profoundly are. Previous researchers agreed on the benefit of wild sites for spiritual outcomes (Heintzmann, 2010; Verschuuren et al., 2010), yet in a Swiss short-term comparative study, Martens et al. (2011) found higher restorative effects for well-kept natural areas than for wilder ones. While the appearance of an area clearly influences its benefit (Chalquist, 2009), precise impacts of its features on spiritual experiences seem to be complex and may be related to context, personality, and attachment (Hume, 1998; Jackson & Henrie, 1983; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993). Further research on this topic could facilitate successful selection and design of ecotherapy sites.

The therapeutic benefits of trees and animals are taking a growing place in ecopsychology research (Chalquist, 2009). Big old trees located in rural or urban areas play a central role in the spiritual experiences of many of our participants as well as for people without explicit spiritual engagement (De Pater et al., 2008; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Næss, 1985; Taylor, 2001b; Van Trigt et al., 2003; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Similarly, participants’ meetings and interactions with animals have resulted in a variety of spiritual outcomes. Their stories support the notion of animals as powerful spiritual helpers (Chalquist, 2009; DeMares, 2000; Harvey, 2006; Noske, 1989; Wood, 2003).

In sum, we have explored spiritual experiences in nature as seen by spiritually engaged participants in the Netherlands. They perceive natural sites as aiding them to get in touch with a deeper self, and they experience close identification with such sites. They describe

sentient communication explained as exchange of spiritual energies through flows or resonance. Particularly influential sites are wilder environments, sacred sites, open spaces, and sites remembered from childhood. Specific natural objects with specific spiritual qualities are old trees, animals, still or dynamic waters, and fire. The descriptions match with numerous views in ecopsychology and support the idea that spiritual experiences in nature are an intrinsic human need.

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